THE PRISON AS MARKET:
HOW PENAL LABOR SYSTEMS REPRODUCE INEQUALITY

by

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As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by *Michael Gibson-Light*, titled *The Prison as Market: How Prison Labor Systems Reproduce Inequality* and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

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Completing this project was at times physically and emotionally demanding. It was also enlightening in both a proverbial sense (as I witnessed the endurance of the human spirit amidst captivity) and a Lovecraftian sense (as I examined an institution of near-incomprehensible reach that remains obscured to many). As always, this was not a solo endeavor.

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DEDICATION

For the prisoner.

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ABSTRACT

Scholars examining the relationship between the prison and social inequality demonstrate that race, ethnicity, and class disproportionately impact imprisonment rates as well as imbalances in how different groups fare upon release. Yet, the prison itself remains a black box: inequality goes in, and inequality comes out, but little is known about the structures or practices contributing to inequity between those milestones. This dissertation addresses this gap by investigating the reproduction of inequality *within* prison. In particular, it investigates disparities resulting from systems of penal labor. To do so, it draws on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork spent working alongside incarcerated laborers at a men's state prison and 82 in-depth interviews with prisoners and facility staff. The prison is here analyzed as a competitive employment system. Adopting this lens, this dissertation makes sense of the mechanisms and pathways through which prisoners of the same custody level and housed in the same facility are nevertheless differentially classified based on the skills and resources they possess. It uncovers meso-level structures through which the imprisoned are sorted into different labor tracts, as well as the micro-level strategies that they employ to navigate and cope with this system. And it examines how labor stratification behind bars impacts prisoners' material wellbeing and understandings of self-worth. This has direct consequences for how punishment is experienced across groups, as well as for prisoners' preparations for release. Beyond merely confirming the relationship between criminal justice system contact and stratification, this work reveals a chain of inequality resulting in particular groups facing disproportionate imprisonment, barriers to resource acquisition during incarceration, and discriminatory treatment upon release.

INTRODUCTION:

Prison Labor & Stratification

in the Era of Mass Incarceration

How much power and talent sometimes perishes…almost for nothing,

in prison and in hardship!

– Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from a Dead House*

A concrete and steel warehouse sits, monolithic, beneath an open sky, surrounded in all directions by razor wire fencing. Inside, in a slate-grey room, 40 men stand shoulder-to-shoulder along two narrow steel tables. Leaning over boxes of plastic wrap and stacks of bread, meat, and cheese, they hurriedly assemble sandwich ingredients. The loud hum of nearby freezers is joined only by the crinkle of plastic and the occasional chatter of the workers. These men are prisoners of *Sunbelt State Penitentiary*, a medium-security men's state prison complex located in the U.S. Sunbelt region.[1] As a facet of their punishment, they spend their waking hours here, in the "food factory," working six-hour shifts, five days per week preparing prison meals. A correctional officer in gleaming sunglasses peers down at them through the thick windows of his central office. Civilian staff members—called "white shirts"—stroll through the site. Sometimes they wrap sandwiches alongside the men; other times they supervise from a distance.

The tallest worker on the line is Soto, a broad shouldered 30-something man from Mexico. At 6'6", he towers over his coworkers and prison staffers. He hunches forward to

perform his daily sandwich-wrapping duties. At the end of the day, he says, his back and legs are often sore from the strain. “I have to move around. … I got to move because, just standing there—I'm too tall. As tall as I am, I got to move around. [If I don’t] my knees will start hurting.”

Soto has worked in the food factory for the past 16 months. Because of his good behavioral record and exemplary work evaluations, he is paid more than most of his coworkers in his work program, but still receives less than $0.50 per hour for his labors. This amounts to a weekly take-home pay that prisoners and correctional officers alike attest is hardly enough to subsist on behind bars, where prisoners must use their earnings to purchase supplementary food as well as pay for medical visits and various fees. In addition to the low rate of pay, Soto struggles against the monotony of the labor. “I've lost the will to come in and work here. You know what I mean? … And now it's just like—it's just like Groundhog Day. It's just the same thing, boom-boom.” He mimes the process of slapping together sandwich materials into plastic. “Cheese, no cheese. That's all that it is.” With a laugh, he reiterates, “That's *all* that changes is cheese or no cheese.” Though he has attempted to switch to more desirable positions within the institution, he has not yet succeeded in moving to a new prison job. His options, he tells me, are limited. “I can’t work certain jobs. I can’t work the *good* jobs because I’m a Mexican national. They tell me I have to work here.” Being quite sociable and expressive, and possessing a high school diploma, Soto at one point sought to work in the prison call center. He was deemed ineligible, however, because of his immigration status. “I don’t got the papers. Need to get them *papers!*” There are few “good” jobs (see Kalleberg 2011) within the prison that foreign nationals are eligible for, and Soto, lacking a competitive set of skills or social ties,

has struggled to move up. “If I try to get into any other job—one of the jobs that people *want*—you got to know somebody to get you in. You know what I mean? I know a lot of people in that yard, but I just can't seem to get the job. I don't know what's going on.”

Across the sprawling complex of the warehouse prison (see Irwin 2005), a very different prison workplace is abuzz. Here, another group of incarcerated workers sits in swivel chairs facing personal computers in the prison call center. Their individual cubicles are adorned with sales scripts, motivational slogans, and family portraits. They speak politely through their headsets to customers in the outside world. These salesmen in orange pitch television advertising packages to business owners across the country who have no idea they are speaking to incarcerated men. Air-conditioning keeps the room at a comfortable temperature and music from a mixture of genres plays softly through wall-mounted speakers via internet radio. The prisoners work autonomously as the single staff member skims over paperwork in his window-lined cubicle, humming along to the music. They occasionally crack jokes or share tales of frustrating calls. When a sale is made, some cheer.

In the middle of the room sits Jake, a muscular white prisoner in his late 30s with tattooed arms and a booming voice. His central cubicle reflects his position in the office. Formally, he is the “inmate trainer,”[2] tasked with introducing new hires to the call center system and sales procedures. Informally, he is often regarded as possessing a wider array of responsibilities in the work program. “I’m the trainer,” he tells me. “What I do is train guys when they’re brand new. And I also try to keep everybody on the same track. I guess on the outside that’d be called a manager.” Though prisoners are barred from holding

authority positions over one another in any official capacity, Jake is sometimes referred to as the "informal manager" or "inmate manager" of this work site.

Jake has worked in the call center since the early weeks of this, his most recent of a string of prison terms. Offering over $1.00 per hour in pay in addition to a comfortable work environment and engaging, skilled activity, the call center is considered one of the best prison jobs. With this higher rate of pay, Jake has been able to accumulate a healthy bit of savings that will help him get on his feet upon release. What's more, the civilian call center manager, with whom Jake has fostered a positive relationship, has expressed willingness to refer him to employers on the outside. Jake attributes his success in securing this highly sought-after position to (1) having already had call center experience and (2) knowing someone on the inside who could give him a referral. "When I got over here [to Sunbelt State Penitentiary], I heard that they have a phone job. And I've done phones like this down in [another prison]. … One of the guys that was up here living in my [housing] pod, I kind of told him, 'Hey, this is what I used to do,' and this and that." He was quickly hired. "When I came, I just came to be on the phones and try to have a good job on the yard and I didn't realize what it was going to be until I got here. … I've learned a lot in the time that I've been here."

It is by now popular knowledge that the U.S. has more prisons and prisoners than any other nation. Despite containing less than 5% of the world's population, it holds nearly 25% of its prisoners, including 1.5 million individuals held in state and federal prison facilities (Pfaff 2017; Wagner and Rabuy 2017; Walmsley 2016). Less well-known, however, is the fact that a vast number of these imprisoned men and women are put to

labor. Indeed, the majority of able U.S. prisoners spend their waking hours working, many of them mandatorily, to produce goods and provide services for penal institutions, other federal and state agencies, and private contractors such as Wal-Mart, Whole Foods, AT&T, Microsoft, and others (Guilbaud 2010; Stephan 2008).[3] For incarcerated individuals like Soto and Jake, participating in penal labor programs is vital to getting through a prison sentence. This is how they pass their time, make money to purchase goods and services on the yard, potentially learn (or hone) marketable skills, and maintain positive outlooks and self-images behind bars. As the above accounts illustrate, however, not all prison jobs are the same, nor are all prisoners accorded the same opportunities.

Prison administrators and front-line staffers attest that any prisoner demonstrating good behavior and positive work performance will "automatically" move up in the hierarchy of prison jobs. As one correctional officer (CO), a man that I call Byrne, told me, "Everybody usually starts here [in the food factory]. Then, if they do well, they get those good jobs. Nobody gets the sign shop [a prized work site] who just showed up on the yard." The way for a prisoner to improve their station in the prison employment system is straightforward, according to CO Byrne: "If they get three E's [excellent reviews] in a row on evaluations, they can basically ask for a new job. It has to do with attendance, attitude, and performance. If you're a new guy, you make sandwiches. And then you go from there." This perspective aligns with a prominent argument from penal labor proponents, who contend that "Prison labor provides…a pathway to correct deviant behavior and possibly find personal redemption" (Benns 2015: 5; see also, Brown and Severson 2011; American Civil Liberties Union 2004). Yet, although Soto consistently received the score of "excellent" on his biweekly work reviews as a result of his strong attendance and

performance record (in addition to maintaining a positive attitude and friendly relationships with staff), he remained relegated to work in the food factory—a so-called "bad prison job." His pathway appeared halted at making sandwiches. Jake, on the other hand, secured a highly sought-after position in the prison call center—a "good prison job"—within weeks of first arriving to the yard.

It is not the severity of their crimes (both have been convicted of violent offenses), nor their disciplinary records (both possess clean behavioral reports), nor even their work performance (both are regularly lauded as excellent workers by overseers) that dictated the job search outcomes of these two incarcerated men. Rather, as this dissertation contends, it is the possession of valued skills and resources, as well as differences in race, ethnicity, and nationality, that influence prisoners' positions in this employment system (that is, an organized system of labor complete with diverse jobs, workers, wages and perks, and established rules and norms for classifying and regulating these workers, overseers, and work sites [Kalleberg 2011; Marsden 1999; Osterman 1987]). And, as I will illustrate, such variation in prison labor market outcomes has direct implications for prisoners' understandings of punishment, their social and economic standing while behind bars, and potentially their prospects for release. In this way, carceral experiences—and penal labor experiences particularly—reproduce and exacerbate social inequalities between prisoner groups along the lines of class, race, and ethnicity.

The Prison & Inequality

An enduring question in sociology and criminology asks: *How does contact with institutions such as the prison shape social inequalities?* As the project of mass incarceration in the United States expanded beginning in the 1970s, the impact of the criminal justice system on disparities across communities grew increasingly apparent (Carson and Anderson 2016; Mitchell 2014; Western 2006). In efforts to unpack the nature of such processes, scholars of punishment and inequality have largely focused on two related phenomena: *pre-prison* discrepancies reflecting disproportionately harsh sentencing for certain segments of the population and *post-prison* disparities in terms of how different demographic groups fare in reentry processes following incarceration. A common strand between much of this research is an emphasis on work—labor market participation and job quality impact chances of imprisonment (Lageson and Uggen 2013), while employment outcomes are commonly relied upon to evaluate successful transition back into society after prison (e.g., Bouffard et al. 2000; Seiter and Kadela 2003).

First, a rich body of scholarly work has unveiled imbalances in the likelihood of imprisonment along class, racial, and ethnic lines in the era of mass incarceration (Simon 1993; Wacquant 2009b; Wakefield and Uggen 2010). Indeed, today's prisoners are disproportionately "drawn from the lowest rungs in society" (Western and Pettit 2010: 8), resulting in prisons which overwhelmingly "house the jobless, the poor, the racial minority, and the uneducated, not the merely criminal" (Wakefield and Uggen 2010: 393). In terms of class, the poor comprise much of the prisoner population, despite similar rates of reported criminal activity across class divides (Morenoff 2005; Wheelock and Uggen

2008). Labor market non- or under-participants are overrepresented in the prison system as labor market gaps leave many susceptible to the carceral apparatus (Wakefield & Uggen 2010; Weiss 2001; Western 2006). Furthermore, many of the nation's prisoners are high school dropouts (Pettit and Western 2004; dropout incarceration rates are even higher for black Americans). In terms of race and ethnicity, the nation's prisons are disproportionately filled with minorities, particularly black men (Beckett et al. 2006; Blumstein and Beck 1999; Lynch and Sabol 2000; Steffensmeier et al. 1998; Van Cleve 2016; Western 2006). Whites and racial/ethnic minorities engage in similar rates of law violation; yet, these groups face different and inequitable attention from policing and surveillance apparatuses. Scholars have argued that a new racial caste system has emerged in the United States as rising numbers of racial and ethnic minorities are confined to prisons and accordingly disenfranchised and cordoned off from mainstream society (Alexander 2010; Blackmon 2008; Smith and Hattery 2008).

Researchers have promoted several theories to account for these patterns (Garland 2017; Pfaff 2017). Some contend that penal policy and practice have shifted away from an emphasis on targeting and treating individual offenders, instead prioritizing the management and incapacitation of aggregate groups deemed threatening to security as well as budgets (Feeley and Simon 1992). The continued swelling of prisoner populations under mass incarceration into the 2000s corresponded with the further development of "risk management" oriented policing and judicial strategies reliant on more punitive penal apparatuses targeting particular demographic groups (Feeley and Simon 1992; Garland 1990; Wacquant 2000, 2001, 2013). The prison system, according to this line of thought, has expanded to contain a surplus population who, lacking employment and social

supports, have been relegated to non-participation in the formal labor market (Wacquant 2009a). Voters commonly support such punitive practices, reflecting what scholars have identified as a reactionary culture with an "appetite for punishment," favoring "law and order" policies and the "war on crime" (Garland 2001b, 2013; Simon 2007, 2010).

Second, scholars have highlighted marked patterns in how different groups fare upon release from prison. Increasingly punitive criminal justice policies and practices in recent decades have had negative effects for the life chances and prospects of those coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Sociological and criminological scholarship in this area has identified disparities in terms of health outcomes (Massoglia 2008; Patterson 2010; Schnittker and John 2007; Spaulding et al. 2011), family formation and family stability (Apel et al. 2010; Comfort 2008; Edin 2001; Lopoo and Western 2005), civic engagement (Manza and Uggen 2006), and other outcomes for disadvantaged groups after they *exit* the prison. In this way, the contemporary prison operates to exclude marginalized groups from mainstream society. Perhaps the most prominently studied effect of criminal justice system contact has been in the arena of labor market and wage outcomes (Cantora 2015; Solomon et al. 2004; Stoll and Bushway 2008; Sutton 2002; Wakefield and Uggen 2010; Western et al. 2001). Employment and earnings are negatively impacted by imprisonment (Pager 2003, 2007; Pettit and Lyons 2009; Sutton 2002; Western 2002; Western and Beckett 1999). In addition to being removed from labor market participation while behind bars, offenders encounter continued exclusion once their sentences are completed (Freeman 1992; Western and Pettit 2010; Western et al. 2001). As such, they face significantly reduced employment rates and earnings, often unable to (re)enter formal labor markets in the free world (Freeman 1992; Holzer 2009; Pager et al. 2009; Pettit and

Lyons 2009; Western and Beckett 1999). This may reduce their wages by as much as 10% to 30% (Geller et al. 2006; Pettit and Lyons 2009; Pettit and Western 2004; Wakefield and Uggen 2010).

Post-release prospects, though diminished for all ex-captives, are notably bleaker for members of minority groups in the United States, who face discrimination along the lines of race as well as criminal history, which interact in racialized perceptions of criminality. Formerly-incarcerated Latino men, for instance, experience decreased lifetime earnings at more than double the rate of formerly-incarcerated whites, while formerly-incarcerated black men face approximately four-times the white rate in addition to experiencing the longest-lasting wage penalty over the life course (Western 2006; See also Pettit and Lyons 2009). Several mechanisms have been identified to explain the link between criminal history and diminishing labor market returns. Felons may be stigmatized or discriminated against by employers during the hiring process (Boshier and Johnson 1974; Holzer 1996; Pager 2007; Solinas-Saunders et al. 2015). In many jurisdictions, ex-prisoners may be formally, legally barred from employment in many industries (Love et al. 1996; Western et al. 2001). Additionally, prisoners often face limited opportunities for skill development or capital accumulation behind bars, which, when coupled with removal from formal labor market activity, may result in an erosion of marketable skills and resources (Wakefield and Uggen 2010; Waldfogel 1994) as well as social ties useful for finding work (Hagan 1993).

Bridging the Gap: Studying Prison (Work) Experiences

The study of inequality surrounding the prison has devoted much attention to uncovering and understanding disparities in which groups are imprisoned and how they fare upon release. This emphasis on pre- and post-prison inequity has resulted in part from a lack of useful data for studying factors contributing to inequalities while offenders are still *in* prison. Indeed, as mass incarceration flourished following the 1970s, researcher access to the inside of the nation's prisons grew rare (Cunha 2014; Goodman 2011; King and Liebling 2008; Reiter 2014; Wacquant 2002).[4] As a result, comparatively little is known about key structures and practices behind bars. According to a 2014 National Research Council report, "Most research on social and economic effects treats prison as a *black box*, with little detailed study of what takes place inside and its potential effects" (Travis et al. 2014: 354, emphasis added). Reiter (2014) goes one step further, framing the prison as a veritable "black site," intentionally restricting entrée. This project ventures to bridge this empirical and theoretical gap by drawing on ethnographic and interview data from the inside to explore how variations in prisoners' carceral experiences—and the structures which shape them—may produce different outcomes of imprisonment. Though vital to our understanding of punishment and inequality in the contemporary era, such factors remain understudied.

A central finding of this dissertation is that the contemporary prison—and, in particular, labor within such facilities—is structured such that different prisoner groups have vastly different experiences of punishment. Despite official rhetorics to the contrary, the institution of penal labor today does not function to transfer skills and positive outlooks

to the imprisoned. Instead, lines are drawn—and jobs are assigned—on the basis of prisoners' existing skills, knowledge, social ties, and demographic characteristics, much as they are in the outside world. As a result, rather than addressing deficits in individual abilities or resumes, this institution reflects and exacerbates inequalities observable in the outside world. As Wakefield and Uggen (2010) note:

> Prisons tend to house those with the least human capital, financial capital, and social capital. … If prisons are not successful in addressing deficits—and there is ample evidence to suggest they are not—widespread incarceration reinforces existing disadvantages, to the detriment of inmates and the communities to which they return (393-394).[5]

Existing research tells us that penal labor is impactful in this regard. Post-release survey and interview studies suggest that participation in skilled, vocational work programming while behind bars may have positive effects on desistance as well as job market prospects following incarceration (Gaes et al. 1999; Seiter & Kadela 2003; Solomon et al. 2004; Travis & Vischer 2005). Scholars contend that working in prison may reduce criminal activity by adding new structure to prisoners' lives (Cohen and Felson 1979); transferring a sense of self-control and an ability to delay gratification, a lack of which is argued to have influenced criminal behavior in the first place (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990); or bolstering prisoners' perceptions of self-worth and the development of

positive narratives about their lives (Maruna 2001). Working prisoners are also said to be better equipped for success than their non-working counterparts, having adopted a greater "stake in conformity" (Toby 1957), making them less likely to reengage in criminal activity (Cohen and Felson 1979; Sampson and Laub 1995).

Despite these reported benefits of positive work experiences for the incarcerated, however, opportunities to acquire skilled work and training in the nation's prisons are vanishing at a rapid rate (Gottschalk 2010; Lynch 2010). What's more, recent survey research reveals that more sought-after skilled or vocational work opportunities behind bars are indeed inequitably distributed along the lines of race as well as gender (Crittenden et al. 2018). As a result, as the examples of Soto and Jake illustrated, prisoners today may have markedly different experiences of work behind bars. While Soto struggles to purchase additional food each week on his meager food factory wages, Jake has already begun financially planning for his release, amassing savings from his work in the prison call center. And, whereas Jake has been able to hone his marketable sales skills (building what his boss calls his "human capital" whilst simultaneously cultivating positive personal narratives to offset his employment history gaps following repeat prison stints), Soto has labored in deskilled monotony, striving fruitlessly to acquire a "good prison job."

These observations raise a series of questions. If "good prisons jobs" and "bad prison jobs" exist, what factors determine the allocation of such assignments? How is this system actually structured at the institutional level? How do prisoners navigate and endure the carceral employment system? What are the outcomes of labor sorting processes for incarcerated workers' ongoing and interwoven experiences behind bars? And how might these internal prison phenomena connect to broader patterns of inequality? In addressing

these questions, this research reveals how the prison—via its structure and the practices of overseers, staffers, and other agents—actively sorts its wards via penal labor assignments. This system privileges those already endowed with valuable capabilities and resources, while erecting hurdles for those found lacking. In this way, the carceral employment system acts as a sort of *sieve*, filtering and sorting the prisoner population along criteria that the institution deems useful.[6] Social barriers are here reproduced not between the poor and rich or the incarcerated and free, but within the narrower range of social class occupied by the prisoner population. By illustrating these processes of sorting and exclusion, this project stands as a link between research on pre- and post-prison disparities, revealing a chain of inequality resulting in particular groups facing (a) disproportionate rates of imprisonment, (b) barriers to skill development and resource acquisition during incarceration, and (c) discriminatory treatment upon release. Hence, while prison "marks" all offenders, the skills and qualifications that they bring in or develop behind bars have powerful effects as well.

Penal Labor in the United States

A primary objective of this dissertation is to better understand growing inequalities faced by individuals coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Examining prisoners' work is central to this endeavor for at least two reasons. First, the institution of penal labor is far reaching. Work programming represents a core component in the organization and management of prison life. This is how most able prisoners spend most of their time. As such, it has the power to contribute a great deal to positive—rehabilitative—carceral

experiences for the millions of individuals behind bars; alternatively, it has the capacity to do great harm to these men and women already at odds with mainstream society. Second, penal labor directly influences the wellbeing of working offenders in a number of ways. Work assignments impact the amount of money that prisoners receive and, consequently, their social and economic standing while behind bars. In paid penal labor positions, wages may vary from less than $0.05 to over $5.00 per hour (Sawyer 2017).[7] With more and more penal expenses being shifted to the incarcerated—via the privatization of care and services and rising fees associated with imprisonment—this pay gap has direct effects on the ability of incarcerated individuals to acquire basic goods and necessities through the prison commissary or through black market exchanges. Furthermore, for the incarcerated as for the free, work remains central to perceptions of self-worth in the face of barriers to dignity (e.g., Hodson 2001).

Before unpacking the linkages between prison work and the reproduction of social inequality it is useful to first highlight the centrality of work to the U.S. carceral system over time. To this end, I will provide a brief history of penal labor from the early years of American independence through today.

Penal labor in early American history

The history of incarceration and work in the U.S. are interwoven. As Jonathan Simon (1993) notes: "Wherever you look in the development of modernist penality you will find labor. Exhort the offenders with religious tracts, but make them work. … Educate them as citizens, but make them work. Treat their pathological features, but make them

work" (39). From the inception of the first penitentiary on American soil, prisoner labor power has been extracted by state and private entities alike. 1796 saw the passage of the first known law to enable prisoners to receive compensation for labor, by the state of New York. Carceral work programming remained prominent in the developing nation. The roots of today's emphasis on work as a path to rehabilitation can be traced back to the penal reformers of the years following the American Revolution, who developed the penitentiary as a means to rekindle the "decency" that they saw as inherent to all deviants. They sought to counter the negative influence of corrupt families and peers by mobilizing rationalized, uniform deprivation and control (Gibson 2011; Rothman 1971). Often, this entailed working throughout the day in silence before being relegated to isolated individual cells overnight. Eastern State Penitentiary, opening in 1829, became an exemplar of this model (Rubin 2013).

In 1865, the nation passed the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery except as punishment for a crime. Throughout the ensuing era, following the American Civil War, prisoners came to be subjected to perhaps the harshest conditions faced by U.S. workers outside of the institution of slavery (Thompson 2011). The nation's prisoners were compelled into tireless manual labor such as mining, laying railroad, factory work, and agricultural work with little reprieve (Ayers 1984; Lichtenstein 1996). It was during this time that the U.S. first mobilized its carceral labor force for profit on a large scale. Prisoners were leased out to private firms, or contractors would be allowed to set up workshops within prison walls to more efficiently utilize its captive workers (McLennan 2008). In the South, it was even common for local law enforcement to systematically

fabricate charges in order to incarcerate greater numbers of poor black men to meet capital's growing demands for greater, cheaper labor power (Blackmon 2008).

This use of penal labor was pervasive in the public and private sectors until the late 1920s, when states gradually abolished convict leasing programs, ending for what seemed like once-and-for-all with Alabama in 1927. New Deal legislation in the 1930s further limited prisoner production exclusively to state goods like license plates, road signs, and uniforms (Thompson 2011). Four decades later, however, legislation such as the Justice System Improvement Act and the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program would once more lift many restrictions on the production, sale, and distribution of prisoner-made goods, paving the way for renewed privatization of prison work programming in the coming years (U.S. Department of Justice 1979; Walshe 2012).

Penal labor in the era of mass incarceration

The 1970s saw the inauguration of the "War on Drugs" in the United States. Begun under Richard Nixon and carried forth by Ronald Reagan and others, this symbolic war entailed harsher treatment of drug offenders and—in concert with the "War on Crime"—more severe forms of policing, particularly in poor and minority communities. Expanding prosecutorial powers starting in this era further magnified disproportionate sentencing patterns (Lynch 2016). The prison became imbued with new responsibility: to incapacitate and punish the rising ranks of women and (particularly) men who had become the targets of this emergent racialized, retributive form of governance (Wacquant 2009b). As imprisonment transformed into the de facto response to more and more transgressions, the

incarcerated labor force grew proportionately. Today, in the context of heightened incarceration rates and privatization arising in the aftermath of the Drug War 70s and subsequent decades, state and federal prisoners have been put to work at record numbers. Approximately two-thirds of current U.S. prisoners participate in work programs within state prisons (see Figure 1) (Hatton 2017; Stephan 2008).[8] Most penitentiaries engage in some manner of contracting out prisoner production or services to the private sector or state-run "correctional industries" businesses (Stephan 2008).

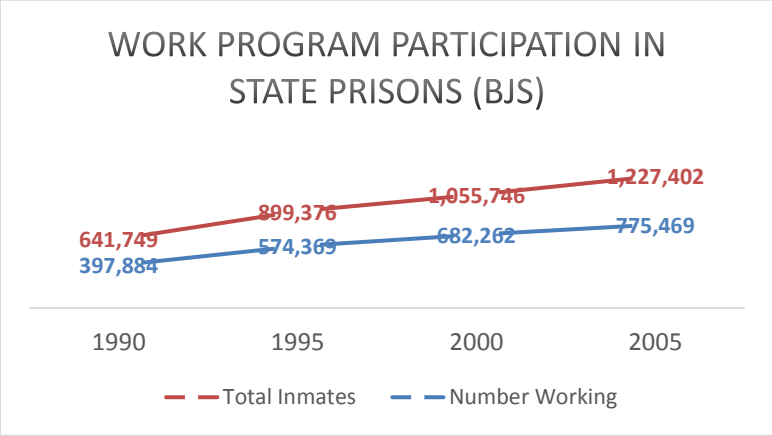

Figure 1. The rise of prisoner labor in state prisons (Stephan 2008)

Rather than far-removed total institutions, contemporary prisons are embedded in the economic world through prisoner labor. The variety of tasks in which working prisoners engage is vast. Throughout the country, convicts maintain and clean state facilities; engage in textiles, data entry, and other light industry; are contracted in public works projects, such as road and park maintenance, construction, and public lands upkeep; engage in agricultural work; work in call centers; and even fight fires in the free world (Goodman 2012a, 2012b; Haney 2010; Hatton 2017; Solomon et al. 2004; Stephan 2008). As an

alternative to offshoring cheap labor, major U.S. firms such as Boeing, Wal-Mart, McDonald's, Microsoft, Victoria's Secret, and others have resorted to "in-sourcing" their production and service needs to the nation's prisoners (Davidson 2015).

Despite these expansive activities, working prisoners are not accorded the same protections or guarantees as other American laborers. For starters, those in many U.S. prisons remain forcibly compelled to work. In many states, "punishments for refusing to [work] include solitary confinement, loss of earned good time, and revocation of family visitation" (Benns 2015: 4). Typical OSHA regulations are not enforced in many prisons, leaving standards for a safe work environment unguaranteed (Atkinson and Rostad 2003). Social security and other state supports are denied as well (regardless of benefit status upon incarceration) (Social Security Administration 2010), as are interventions such as federal mandates for a minimum wage, leaving many to struggle to purchase necessary goods and services. Indeed, today's "inmates-as-consumers" (Aviram 2015) are responsible for fees covering medical care co-pays, telephone use, room and board, electricity, and other amenities, in addition to the costs of supplementing diminishing institutional food offerings (Buchanan 2007; Gipson and Pierce 1996; Gottschalk 2006, 2010; Jackson 2007; Levingston 2007; Lynch 2010; Smoyer and Lopes 2017; Von Zielbauer 2007).

Penology in the post-recession neoliberal era

The state's increasing reliance on penal labor aligns with a broader emphasis on fiscal responsibility coupled with self-reliance underlying the day-to-day management of the prison today. Indeed, a growing body of literature suggests that the U.S. is home to a

flourishing neoliberal penology. In it, systems of punishment have evolved to emphasize fiscal efficiency over rehabilitation. This may be observed in neoliberal *discourses* (emphasizing responsibilization and the new role of "inmates-as-consumers" [Aviram 2015]), *objectives* (prioritizing budgetary concerns and financially efficient penal operations [e.g., Wacquant 2010]), and *techniques* (reliant on cost-shifting and internal competition via carceral labor systems [Buchanan 2007; Weiss 2001]) (see Conclusion).

Scholars have identified pathways neoliberalism has taken in its rise as a dominant American discourse and rationale for penal practice (see Lacey 2013). Zooming in, the present work outlines the techniques of neoliberal penality as implemented and imposed within prison walls, unlocking a contemporary site of deep and lasting stratification. By foregrounding prisoners' experiences, it reveals the ways in which neoliberalism is incorporated into the administration of punishment through mechanisms such as responsibilization and cost-shifting. Unlike past studies of the macro connections between political economy and punishment (e.g., Enshen 2014; Lacey 2013; Sutton 2002), this research considers qualitative differences in carceral experiences to reveal the ground-level influences of neoliberal trends on carceral outcomes. Moving beyond classical critical punishment scholarship, which calls attention to macro patterns of labor appropriation through incarceration (Melossi and Pavarini 1981; Rusche [1933] 1978; Rusche and Kirchheimer [1939] 2017), this dissertation turns toward micro arenas in which labor is foregrounded in the contemporary prison and consequences for individual experiences of punishment.

Methodological Approach: The Ethnography of Penal Labor

To illuminate the "black box" of the prison and examine on-the-ground realities of prison life and labor, I ventured into one such institution to observe day-to-day practices in this context. Drawing on unique ethnographic access to a men's state prison in the U.S. Sunbelt region (here defined as the area below the 36th Parallel; see Browning and Gesler 1979), I conducted 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork across 2015 and 2016. I call this anonymous prison complex Sunbelt State Penitentiary (SSP). During these 18 months, I worked alongside incarcerated laborers in a variety of prison contexts, observing their daily practices and participating in many aspects of penal labor. I also shadowed staff members in a variety of capacities in order to examine different aspects of penal surveillance and supervision, the allocation of work, and the management of the prisoner population. Additionally, I interviewed 82 prisoners and staffers regarding their experiences and outlooks towards prison life and labor.

To secure prison access, I first met with the Director of the Department of Corrections (DOC) under whose jurisdiction it fell. Following initial contact via post, I was invited to travel to DOC headquarters to outline my proposed research strategy and negotiate the particulars of such a project. These included the need to freely navigate the prison complex during prisoner work hours, formalizing processes of consent, accessing private spaces to conduct one-on-one interviews, ensuring that my presence would not burden departmental resources, and scheduling the requisite DOC training procedures before first entering the facility (consisting primarily of slides and video presentations from staff orientation modules detailing basic safety procedures and chains of command).

Following Director approval of my proposal, ethnographic observations took place within a medium security yard at SSP, which housed over 1000 men convicted of a variety of crimes, ranging from possession of a dangerous substance (i.e., drug possession) to "white collar crimes" (e.g., fraud or money laundering) to murder (after years or decades of good behavior, higher custody prisoners could eventually be moved to medium security yards if approved). Colloquially, participants referred to their unit by the general phrase "the yard," which was meant to capture the housing bays, recreational yard space, and adjacent buildings. This particular unit was chosen because it contained a large prisoner population, most of its prisoners were eligible—and indeed required—to work, and it housed a model variety of work programs. These ranged from deskilled, despotically-managed programs evocative of traditional images of penal labor (e.g., food service or contemporary chain gangs), to skilled, engaging work opportunities in more comfortable environments that participants said, "feels like a real job" in the "free world" (e.g., a fully-functioning call center). Prisoners were unable to move between units, making each yard home to a contained labor market with its own unique work programs, staff overseers, and captive workforce.

I was granted an ID badge so that I could enter and exit this facility freely. I was accorded the status of "volunteer" (typically reserved for non-employee entrants like visiting tutors or chaplains) to facilitate daily access. Prison volunteers occupy an ambiguous standing in the social order of the prison. The relative unfamiliarity of their position contributes to social encounters that do not necessarily adhere to established scripts and hierarchies. This unique status allowed me to sometimes strategically alter my role on-site. On most days, I operated as "worker" alongside penal laborers in different

work programs. Occasionally, I shadowed staff, observing institutional operations within and beyond prison walls. Experiencing each of these stages of programming, management, and security revealed a fuller portrait of prison labor, which structures time within the institution (Guilbaud 2010). Wearing plain clothes, my researcher status overt to participants, I freely traversed the facility at different times during prisoner working hours (weekdays between approximately 4:30am and 5:30pm) to observe work in multiple spaces as well as on the prison yard. Over time I became a regular fixture at SSP. I worked alongside prisoners of all ages, racial and ethnic groups, and criminal histories. To accommodate my online teaching duties during semesters, I was commonly on-site during three or four workdays weekly, which aligns with research strategies advocated by European prison ethnographers (King and Liebling 2008). Sensitive to the potential for institutional accommodations to my presence, I remained attentive for possible changes in operations on account of my fieldwork. The length of my data collection period helped diminish any effects of procedural alterations that might have influenced prisoner and staff practices early on. Additionally, I made sure to regularly arrive to the facility at different times of day and refrained from alerting participants or administrators to my schedule to impede the potential for behavioral or operational changes around my presence.

Thousands of pages of fieldnotes were recorded across 18 months. Notes were typed upon returning from each day of fieldwork. Nearly 100% of the individuals I encountered at SSP quickly consented to participate in ethnographic observations. Indeed, only two prisoners declined to participate in observations; at their request, they were omitted from written fieldnotes. Many were enthusiastic about the prospect of sharing experiences and perspectives (see Copes et al. [2012] for a discussion of the reported

benefits of participation in qualitative prison research). Several participants warmly regarded me by nicknames like “Hemmingway” or “Kerouac” on account of my regular note-taking. Calls to “Put this in your book!” were frequent.

To structure visits and better focus observations on consistent processes and themes over time, I spent most days alternating between four primary work sites within this unit. These four workplaces will be described in detail in the following chapter. For context, however, I provide a brief portrayal of each here.

The first site was the sign shop—one of the two “best” prison jobs, according to participants—in which 30-40 working prisoners engaged in the skilled labor of producing street signs and other signage to fulfill state and private orders. Paying between $0.50 and $1.00 per hour, this was the second-highest paying job in the facility (only select skilled jobs like the sign shop and call center were allowed to pay above $0.50 hourly, per facility policy). This site was managed by three civilian employees of the state’s Correctional Industries program and was referred to as a “state-run” job. The most frequent customers of the shop were the state Department of Transportation and several universities. During fieldwork here, I participated in multiple stages of the screen printing and vinyl sign production processes.

The second site was the fleet garage, a fully stocked auto garage where a small crew of four to seven men performed regular maintenance and repairs on the facility’s vast vehicular fleet. Like the majority of sites, the garage offered wages between $0.05 and $0.50 per hour; most mechanics received pay at the higher-end of this scale. The site was overseen by two civilian employees of DOC’s Facilities Division, as well as one on-site correctional officer. Due to accountability concerns expressed by staffers (should anything

go wrong in the repair of a vehicle), I was not enabled to directly participate in hands-on maintenance, nor did I attempt to. Instead, I operated in a capacity that one prisoner referred to as an "intern," helping to move tools and supplies, check basic readings like fuel levels, and break down stations at the end of day.

The third site was the food factory, an overwhelmingly derided food prep warehouse in which between 60 to 90 men daily rolled bologna, wrapped sandwiches, inventoried food stores, and engaged in a range of other largely-deskilled tasks. In this site, most workers received closer to the lower end of the $0.05 to $0.50 range per hour. This and all food services at SSP were contracted through and managed by a private firm. As such, aside from one on-site correctional officer, the food factory was overseen by a large staff of private employees of the firm, whom prisoners and staffers called "white shirts." This was therefore described as a "private" prison job. Here, I participated in a range of tasks alongside prisoners, including wrapping up bologna and other meats, assembling sandwich supplies for daily lunches, and rolling biscuit dough in the bakery station.

The fourth and final work program on which I focused observations was a call center. This was the highest-paying and second of the two most lauded jobs onsite (alongside the sign shop), in which a staff of around 25-35 men engaged in telemarketing to sell television advertising time. Prisoners in the call center received the highest wages in the prison and were the only workers to receive over $1.00 per hour—above even the national average of $0.89 per hour (Pryor 2005). Like the food factory, this work site was managed by a private firm as part of a public-private partnership with DOC. It was overseen daily by one or two private employees of that firm. Unlike the food factory, however, this work site was not home to an on-site correctional officer; additionally, it was considered a

skilled position and boasted of perks like high pay, free coffee, and music played through mounted wall speakers. For reasons such as these, it was commonly considered more similar to the sign shop (a "state-run" job) than to the food factory (another "private" job). Similar to restrictions faced in the fleet garage, I was not allowed to make sales calls in the call center. Instead, I listened in on calls, participated in trainings, and shadowed salesmen.

Consent at these sites was established during "town hall" style meetings in which I read from a script detailing my project and answered questions from prisoners and staff before seeking affirmative verbal consent from each individual. Upon encountering new people, I went through the same process one-on-one. This was especially frequent at the food factory, where turnover was high.

In-depth interviews

To supplement observational data, I conducted 82 semi-structured in-depth interviews with prisoners and staff—69 with prisoners and 13 with staff members across the institution. Prisoner participants were drawn from the four primary work programs where I conducted fieldwork. Questions covered topics relating to life and labor behind bars with particular interest in perceptions and practices of work. Interviewees discussed work histories in and out of prison, assessments of different work programs, navigating the prison employment system, challenges surrounding prison services, and expectations and plans for release (see Appendix A for the semi-structured interview schedule). The nature of the prison and prisoners' dominated schedules sometimes made it difficult to secure time to conduct these interviews. Because of this, they ranged from 15 to 80 minutes, averaging

approximately 30 minutes. Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder that I was permitted to carry with me.

Although most prisoners quickly consented to be included in observational fieldnotes, many were initially reluctant to engage in interviews. One reason for this was that many had experienced video or audio recordings used against them in court and were apprehensive of my tape recorder. One consented to talk to me in this capacity without the recorder, which I transcribed by hand during the interview. Several correctional officers were similarly reticent to be recorded, citing instances (often indirectly recounted to them) in which COs had been recorded and then sanctioned for statements or behaviors. Another reason that some were hesitant to consent to sit-down interviews early on was that these were conducted one-on-one. In prison, solo encounters between prisoners and non-prisoners are often met with suspicion. For fear of attracting negative attention—including that of the racialized gang hierarchy behind bars—a small number declined to be interviewed. In several instances, prisoners who initially expressed such concerns later consented once I had been "vouched for" by other influential men and my presence became normalized. As time went on, prisoners and staffers alike grew more trusting of my motivations and consented to interviews at increasing rates. Influenced by the racial politics of the institution—informal rules governing and limiting interactions between racial/ethnic cliques (Goodman 2014; Walker 2016)—white prisoners were quicker to consent to recorded interviews in the early weeks of collection, increasing their final participation rates. The reluctance of other groups eventually faded but resulted in fewer interviews from racial/ethnic minorities overall. The final prisoner interview sample demographics were:

20 Hispanic (12 Mexican-American, 8 foreign national), 34 white, 14 black, and 1 Native American.

Unlike survey-based or other quantitative studies, the ethnographic and interview-based approach that I employed in researching this institution enabled me to capture the organization of prison workplaces and the daily processes of prisoner labor at the micro level. In addition, this allowed me to illustrate the composition of various work programs which constitute an internal prison employment system (with its own captive labor force) at the meso level. Hence, these qualitative data reveal structures and processes not readily apparent via other methods.

Sunbelt State Penitentiary and its prisoners

Conducting research in a carceral institutional setting necessarily involves the participation of three parties: not only the researcher and respondents, but also the organization itself (see Borgatti and Molina 2005). Ensuring the confidentiality of my vulnerable prisoner participants, staffers, and the particular facility required the distortion of some characteristics. Anonymizing the prison was a condition of access, but I will here provide what information I can to help contextualize findings within these limitations.

SSP is in the top quartile of U.S. prison facilities in terms of average daily population size (Stephan 2008). Providing direct demographic data of the prisoner population here has the potential to unintentionally identify the facility. With this in mind, I developed a strategy to provide approximate demographic information that will not map directly on to any single prison in the region. I aggregated the demographic information of

four comparable penal institutions to provide an approximate portrait of the prisoner population at Sunbelt State Penitentiary. These four institutions were chosen on the basis of being located in the U.S. Sunbelt region and possessing populations and security levels analogous to my field site. Table 1 provides the approximate racial/ethnic makeup of the population of SSP (also mirrored in the unit) derived from this aggregation. The demographics of individual work sites where fieldwork was conducted are also reported. These, too, were altered in proportion to the adjusted general population figures to maintain pertinent relationships. Rounding or changing organizational statistics for the purposes of confidentiality such as this is common in institutional ethnography (e.g., Kunda 2006).

Table 1. Racial/Ethnic Composition of SSP Work Programs

	Race/Ethnicity				
	White	**Black**	**Mexican American**	**Foreign National**	**Other**
General Population	35%	33%	17%	13%	2%
Call Center	70	20	8	0	0
Sign Shop	39	43	11	0	7
Fleet Garage	57	0	14	29	0
Food Factory	24	24	19	32	1

Notes: The percentages reported here have been adjusted to ensure the confidentiality of participants and of the institution itself. Percentages reported for work sites have been altered in proportion to the adjusted general population statistics.

Sunbelt State Penitentiary is a large "warehouse prison": a sprawling institution which, despite its size, crowds mass numbers of prisoners in limited space within housing units, relies heavily on new surveillance technologies to rigidly enforce institutional rules, and limits recreational and rehabilitative programming in an effort to strategically monitor and control the swelling prisoner population (Irwin 2005). As if reflecting the design of

sprawling metropolises in the Sunbelt, such expansive, crowded penal facilities are common in this region. Historically, the southern half of the United States was home to the rapid expansion of the institution of penal labor in the years following the abolition of slavery (Blackmon 2008; Thompson 2011). Today, in the face of chronic labor shortages and massive carceral populations that might be mobilized as surplus labor, the region remains the seat of such activity (Stephan 2008; Weiss 2001) while wielding growing influence over national penal policy (Campbell and Schoenfeld 2013). The contemporary warehouse prison has evolved to accommodate these trends. The many bodies contained by these facilities are increasingly put to work. The labor system that Irwin (2005) briefly noted in his description of the warehouse prison (e.g., p. 75) has since expanded to more fully utilize its captive workforce. Today's prisoners are less the "products" stored in the carceral warehouse and more the warehouse workers that it puts to labor.

This is a state prison, meaning its administrative and security staff are state employees. However, through various public-private partnerships, many civilian staff members (i.e., not correctional officers) are employed by private firms contracted to oversee services such as food production or medical care, or to manage particular work programs like the call center. The privatization of penal labor in this manner is accomplished via public-private partnerships through which individual businesses remunerate the Department of Corrections for the ability to operate behind prison walls. Unlike work release programs or traditional convict leasing systems, prisoners involved in such work details do not leave the penitentiary and their wages and other facets of care continue to be provided by the institution rather than directly by the firm.

Linking Prison Structures & Social Reproduction

To make sense of the experiences of working prisoners—and to understand how variations in their experiences can contribute to different outcomes of punishment—this project applies theoretical concepts from the sociology of culture to the qualitative study of the prison. A central literature in this area considers the role of key social institutions, such as schools, in filtering or classifying individuals in ways that favor those from advantaged class or demographic backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Stevens et al. 2008). Such institutions privilege those that exhibit outlooks, skills, and resources that are valued in particular social arenas (Bourdieu 1996; Willis 1977). The work of Pierre Bourdieu offers valuable insights in this regard. According to Bourdieu, the social world is made up of competitive "fields" in which actors strive to secure influence as well as valued resources or rewards (Bourdieu 1993b). Such resources are referred to as *capitals*. In this sense, the concept of capital goes beyond the typical understanding of simply financial capital to encompass many kinds of "resources that provide different forms of power" (Sallaz and Zavisca 2007: 23). Indeed, the structure of a given field may be "defined by the unequal distribution of capital" within it (Bourdieu 2005: 195). Capital may come in a variety of forms, including economic capital (wealth and property), cultural capital (embodied forms of useful knowledge or dispositions), and social capital (durable ties to influential others) (Bourdieu 2005). Approaching the social world through this lens highlights the ways in which certain individuals or groups (i.e., those who reflect or embody valued skills, characteristics, and outlooks) are rewarded greater access to desired

outcomes; those lacking in prized areas, on the other hand, may face significant hurdles to success.

Social institutions act to filter or classify social actors in a variety of ways. For example, they may "sort and sieve" individuals along the lines of socioeconomic background (Blau and Duncan 1967). And, when rigid institutional structures demand adherence to particular dispositions or norms, groups that find themselves unable to conform may suffer (Willis 1977). In other words, rather than transferring valuable resources to those who lack them, such key institutions operate to merely classify individuals according to what capitals they already possess. According to Bourdieu, by privileging some and punishing others in this manner, institutions operate as agents of "ritual exclusion," reifying the boundaries between different social classes (Bourdieu 1996).

I approach the prison as a mediator of social mobility—and *immobility*—impacting a distinct rung of society. A primary way that this occurs, I maintain, is via the allocation of jobs in the prison employment system on the basis of prisoners' cultural, economic, and social capital. Despite its expansive role in American society, detailed processes of social reproduction within the contemporary prison have rarely been explicitly empirically examined. Setting the stage for this effort, Chapter 1 will detail the expansive penal labor market at Sunbelt State Penitentiary. It asks: What does the employment system behind bars look like? And how do working prisoners evaluate and rank different work offerings? At the top of the prison employment hierarchy sit skilled, higher-paying "top-tier" work sites. I describe these and other work programs at Sunbelt State Penitentiary in ethnographic detail, drawing on prisoners' own discourses surrounding prison jobs. The

result is an account of prisoner "folk rankings" of the work opportunities available to them—i.e., what things they value in a prison job, what they seek to avoid, and how they assess the management, organization, and daily realities of different labor programs.

Scholars have established that different punishment technologies may be differentially deployed against prisoner groups. Varieties of carceral experiences have been documented, for instance, between women's and men's facilities (Kruttschnitt et al. 2013; Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2003; McCorkel 2003), and across custody or detention levels (Liebling 2015; Reiter 2016) to illustrate distinctive challenges that some may face in mitigating the pains of imprisonment (Crewe 2009, 2011; Sykes 1958). Viewing these dynamics through the social reproduction framework advances our understanding of such processes, revealing mechanisms and pathways through which prisoners in the same facility and of the same custody level are nevertheless sorted into different classes behind bars, leading to different outcomes for prisoner groups. To this end, Chapter 2 will detail how the contemporary prison relies on various *sorting mechanisms* through which it promotes those in possession of valued forms of capital, skills, and dispositions to positions in desirable "good prison jobs." This chapter asks: If everyone must work, how are jobs assigned? Who (or what) is privileged in this process? Much like the elite schools studied by Bourdieu and others, I contend that the prison is not engaged in transferring new skills or outlooks; rather, it is "merely teaching fish to swim" (Bourdieu 1996: 73) (or what Wilson [1987] calls a "creaming" process). In each case, the technical functions of the institutions "effectively disguise their social function as agents of ritual exclusion" (ibid.). Unlike education institutions, however, American prisons not only "teach fish to swim," but may also be said to *teach rocks to sink*. Those found lacking along valued criteria are

not merely barred from the top, but are actively relegated to the bottom of labor, economic, and social hierarchies within the institution via sorting into derided "bad prison jobs." By consigning the un-endowed to the lower rung of the employment system, the prison facilitates conditions resulting in economic precarity behind bars, potentially promoting negative outlooks towards work (rather than positive "work ethics") and impeding the acquisition or protection of dignity.

Linking the Prison Labor Market & Carceral Experiences

Researchers have recognized the prison system as a labor market institution with powerful implications for overall labor market participation, unemployment rates, and stratification in the free world (Sutton 2002; Wakefield and Uggen 2010; Western and Beckett 1999; Western and Pettit 2010). Critical scholars have even contended that penal policy responds to market needs and acts to actively control the labor power of the poor (Rusche [1933] 1978; Rusche and Kirchheimer [1939] 2017; Weiss 2001). Yet, focusing entirely on broader "outcomes rather than processes" in this manner—that is, by emphasizing longer-term, macro effects of incarceration and penal labor rather than the way that such institutions are organized in practice—risks losing sight of on-the-ground realities of this environment (Garland 2004: 167). Here, too, the prison remains a black box: it is connected to various outcomes for offenders and for society writ large, but our knowledge of how conditions and labor outcomes are linked is limited.

To address this, I draw on the labor process literature, which emphasizes "shop floor" organization and practice to make sense of the world of work across contexts. From this perspective, popularized by Michael Burawoy, workers are not merely cogs to be utilized unthinkingly by management; instead, they are agentic social actors who engage in various practices and strategies on the shop floor. To answer questions about why workers behave the way that they do—e.g., why they work as hard as they do or why they continue to participate in exploitative labor relationships—this perspective turns to the day-to-day dynamics of the workplace (e.g., Burawoy 1979, 1985). By applying the labor process paradigm to the prison setting, I examine how the incarcerated actually perform penal labor, highlighting the strategies of working prisoners and the micro-level interactions between groups of incarcerated laborers and management. Employing a comparative lens, I explore how the labor process varies between different types of prison work sites.

In line with this tradition, I approach worker agency using the metaphor of work as a "game," in which laborers engage in collective practices and strategies aimed at navigating and enduring the realities of work while seeking desired outcomes (Burawoy 1979; Sallaz 2015; Sharone 2014). In the prison context, such games might be understood as a form of "secondary adjustments," or arrangements "by which a member of an organisation employs unauthorised means, or obtains unauthorised ends, or both, thus getting around the organisation's assumptions as to what he should do and get and hence what he should be" (Goffman 1961: 171). Through this lens, Chapter 3 asks: How do prisoners endure the conditions of penal labor? How do work environment, surveillance, oversight, skill level, and other factors influence strategies and practices to this end? It

examines the various "work games" at play across varying prison labor contexts to reveal that, beyond providing distinct experiences of work, these different sites facilitate notably different forms of worker action.

In turn, I document how different work games map on to different approaches to (in)dignity, enabling some to acquire or safeguard self-worth while others may be too busy resisting mortification to engage in such pursuits. At the bottom reaches of the employment system hierarchy, in "bad prison jobs," incarcerated laborers are occupied by strategic action aimed at actively *defying indignities* of prison life and labor to which they are unduly exposed. "Good prison jobs," on the other hand, facilitate rhetorical and practical strategies through which workers engage in *re-injecting dignity* into their lives through their work. In this way, the structure of the prison employment system leads to different experiences of work, punishment, and individuals' sense-of-self between sites. All such games must be carried out within boundaries set by the institution, however. As a result, even the simplest individual coping strategy may contribute to the reproduction of underlying structures detrimental to the larger worker population.

Finally, this dissertation explores the outcomes of prison labor stratification in terms of the material wellbeing of working prisoners. In an environment in which some receive close to $0.05 for an hour of work while others receive over $1.00 for the same amount of labor time, experiences of life behind bars can vary greatly. Complementing the previous chapter's focus on outcomes related to worker dignity, Chapter 4 turns toward another set of outcomes of labor stratification behind bars. It asks, broadly: How does the prisoner wage gap shape precarity on the inside? How does it affect prisoner access to important goods or services behind bars as well as their preparations for release? As a result

of wage disparities between prisoner groups, the disadvantaged often struggle to acquire substantial food or hygiene products from the commissary. They also face challenges related to participating in the prison black market, where ramen noodles are used as informal currency to purchase fruits and vegetables, warmer clothing, and more. Lower-paid workers are also less equipped to afford numerous prison fees required to visit the doctor, call a loved one, or access electricity to power personal electronics. Higher-paid prisoners, conversely, have less difficulty acquiring such goods and services. Some even reported amassing significant savings for release and sending "remittances" home to support their families. For this reason, they were oft referred to as the "prison CEOs" on the yard.

Summary Remarks

Following 18 months spent working alongside the incarcerated men of Sunbelt State Penitentiary, my analysis of the employment system that is the modern prison reveals that the world of work behind bars is not organized around principles of equity or rehabilitation, as is officially maintained. This institution relies on carceral labor to maintain penal facilities and generate revenue for continued operations. As such, in the allocation of prison jobs, it prioritizes those among the incarcerated who already possess the skills and resources (valued forms of *capital*) necessary to efficiently contribute to this endeavor. Such capitals, unfortunately, are not evenly distributed amongst class, racial, or ethnic

groups in American society, and are particularly imbalanced amongst incarcerated populations (Wakefield and Uggen 2010).

The core argument of this dissertation is that prisoner experiences of carceral labor play a significant role in reproducing inequalities along class, racial, and ethnic lines. As the following chapters will examine, the prisoners of Sunbelt State Penitentiary experienced punishment in markedly different ways, informed in large part by the skills or resources they possessed. The prison operates as sieve, placing them into different labor tracts based on these resources. In this context, outside disparities are reinforced by practices tied to job assignments, facility organization, and supervision, as well as by prisoners' practices within specific contexts. In other words, social inequalities are reproduced between already-disadvantaged groups through the interplay of the structure of the penal facility, the prison employment system, specific work environments, formal and informal economic markets, and the strategic action of actors within these nested contexts. Thus, while contact with the prison system limits the job market opportunities of all ex-offenders (Pager 2007), the resources, skills, and qualifications that they employ while *inside* the prison have powerful mediating and compounding effects on which men fare better or worse both during and potentially following incarceration. These structures and procedures map on to broader penological strategies of the post-recession neoliberal era.

CHAPTER 1

A 'City within the City':

The Prison as Employment System

This strange house, in which I was to…endure so many sensations, of which, if I had not experienced them in reality, I could never have had even the vaguest notion.

– Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from a Dead House*

The Conventional View: Prisoner Labor as Monolithic

In the morning hours of a clear summer day, eight men occupy a small patch of land on the side of a large interstate highway. The temperature, already climbing, will exceed heat advisory levels in a matter of hours. Seven of these men sport the same uniform: a vivid orange t-shirt, orange pants, and worn black boots. The letters D.O.C. are emblazoned down their shirt backs and pant legs. One man wears an orange bucket hat, two others wear wide-brimmed straw hats fraying at the edges, and the rest wear sweat-stained orange trucker caps. All wear sunglasses and yellow reflective vests for roadside safety. A decal on the side of a nearby van reveals that these are imprisoned workers from the nearby state prison complex, Sunbelt State Penitentiary. As traffic speeds past, they haul large, clear plastic trash bags over their shoulders, most already filled with refuse collected from the side of the road. They wield pointed rods called "litter sticks" to pierce strewn cups, food

containers, bits of plastic and paper, and other garbage that they will shake into the bags. Some hold two bags with the same hand, a sign that they are "beasting it"—a competitive game of one-upmanship that working prisoners sometimes play to see who can collect and carry the most in a given time.

The eighth man stands in the shade of the van in stoic silence. He is a correctional officer tasked with surveilling this captive crew. His collared shirt and slacks—not to mention his fully stocked black utility belt and firearm—distinguish him from the orange-clad workers. With thumbs hooked into his belt, he scans the surrounding area calmly, his face largely obscured by wraparound mirrored sunglasses and a dark cap pulled down low. He turns his head quickly to the left to watch an incarcerated worker who has momentarily set down his equipment to stretch. The man in orange leans backwards a bit, tilts his hat up to wipe the sweat from his brow, and briefly squints into the sight of the oncoming traffic and the spinning neon truck stop sign at the next exit, before picking up his bag and returning to his task.

This roadside crew represents the quintessential image of carceral labor. For most of the morning commuters on this stretch of highway—like many Americans in general—the passing scene of these trash collectors in orange will likely be their only firsthand view of forced labor. Aside from the occasional news story exposing some clothing line for the sale of prison-produced textiles, or depictions of incarcerated kitchen workers on popular television programs like *Orange is the New Black*, the institution of penal labor appears somewhat monolithic.

Yet, the on-the-ground reality of prisoner work is quite distinct from this popular image. In the early days of my fieldwork at SSP, I would quickly learn what those on the inside already knew: that the world of work behind bars is quite expansive, diverse, and competitive.[9] The nation's sprawling penal complexes are home to many different jobs of varying skill, pay, and perks. The prison relies on codified rules to organize its work proceedings and govern the assignment, management, and expectations of labor. It is also home to numerous informal norms, which often supersede official departmental orders in daily workplace practice. A large internal work force made up of the captive population navigates the penal labor market, compelled to compete for the most desirable positions on the basis of their skills, social ties, and other resources. And, as in the free world, a shrouded informal market, in which participants sell illicit goods and services, exists in the shadows of the formal system.

Taken together, these features characterize what labor scholars call an "employment system": an organized system of labor complete with numerous jobs of different skill and pay levels, diverse workers seeking these jobs to secure wages and various perks, and basic rules and norms that classify and regulate workers, managers, and work sites (Kalleberg 2011; Marsden 1999; Osterman 1987). The prison employment system is comprised of workers in the form of prisoners (although they cannot legally be categorized as "employees" [Gibson-Light 2017; Zatz 2008, 2009]). The produce goods and provide services that are utilized by other local, state, and federal institutions, as well as by private firms or consumers in many cases. In addition, correctional officers (COs) and other staffers fulfil the role of frontline managers, while administrators, the state, and the private firms that contract prisoner labor take the place of the owners found in free

world labor contexts. In essence, the entirety of the institution is organized in one way or another around penal labor. With few exceptions (such as the small subset of prisoners participating in morning education classes),[10] most prisoners spend most of their weekday hours working. The institutional security apparatus and staff are tasked with coordinating and surveilling these workers and their activity. In this regard, the prison is not only an economic actor in terms of the provision of goods and services generated by the incarcerated workforce—acting as purveyor as well as "labor market institution" (Western and Beckett 1999; Western and Pettit 2010)—but also resembles a microcosm of the broader economy. As one staff member would put it: "The prison is like its own city, where the prisoners do all of the work."[11]

Approaching the prison as employment system, I highlight the perspective of the workers in this arrangement. How vast is the variety of labor duties that occupy their time in the penitentiary? How do they evaluate or rank the varied work offerings behind bars? Put another way: To be sent to prison today is to be sent to work; so, what does this work look like and how do prisoners feel about it? To address these questions, this chapter begins by illustrating the diversity of work at Sunbelt State Penitentiary, chronicling the sights and sounds of the bustling prison, in which much of daily activity revolves around work. Then, drawing on the insights of incarcerated participants, I explore the perks and drawbacks of different labor programs in their eyes. Not all prison jobs are equal, and workers' valuations inform their practices and strategies as they navigate prison life and labor. Outlining participants' *folk rankings* of these programs reveals that contemporary penal labor is not only diverse, but in fact stratified. Certain positions are coveted for their pay, conditions, and particular occupational and penological features, while others are

derided and avoided if possible. Finally, zooming in, I describe in ethnographic detail the environments of four select work sites—the food factory, the fleet auto garage, the sign shop, and the call center. These work programs, which sit at different positions on the hierarchy of prison jobs, represent ideal sites from which to assess the experience of contemporary punishment from different angles. This will set the stage for future chapters to explore structures, practices, strategies, and outcomes observable on the carceral shop floor.

A Trip Through Sunbelt State Penitentiary: Prisoner Labor as Diverse

Prisons are characteristically removed from society. This has been noted, for instance, in regard to the challenges posed for security staff, who report feelings of isolation and distrust (Lerman 2013). While the struggles of the correctional workers operating prisons have been explored (as has the extent of their powerful collective influence [Owen 1988; Page 2011]), the experiences of incarcerated laborers remain more obscured from public and researcher insight. Entering the prison to conduct ethnographic fieldwork, I was granted a rare look at this hidden and complex world of work.

The road to Sunbelt State Penitentiary is long and narrow with little else to see in either direction. At 6:00am, two snaking lines of light crowd the lanes—one long row of red tail lights belonging to staffers entering the prison to begin their shifts, and one of white headlights belonging to the departing officers whom they are relieving. This is shift change at SSP. The night crew exits, the morning shift enters, and white transport vans—each

pulling a trailer complete with porta-toilet, water coolers, and the appropriate tools for the day's work—sit idling by the prison gates, waiting for the outside prisoner work crews to be "turned out" to be transported to their destinations throughout neighboring counties. An incarcerated shoeshine looks on from his makeshift station—an old desk chair atop a wooden box—observing the staff and prisoners enter and exit for work, awaiting instructions from any CO who might require his services. Having no "customers," he sits calmly in the chair, hands folded over his stomach.

By 7:00am, the work day for most incarcerated workers has begun. Just outside the gates, three grounds crew workers are spread out close to the road. Like other outside crews (that is, those who operate outside of prison walls), they wear reflective yellow vests over their orange attire. There appears to be no one immediately supervising them. Two of the men dig up weeds with ancient hoes, a third reclines *in* his wheelbarrow beneath a withered tree, one leg propped upwards. He leans forward slightly to get a good look at me over his sunglasses. Realizing who I am—"Flaco," the resident researcher, and not a CO from whom he might fear punishment for lounging on the job—he nods and reclines back once more.

Closer to the main point of entry, another small crew drags red plastic rakes over an area of gravel. They pull their tools slowly along precise, parallel rows, like sullen Zen monks tending the garden. A CO stands by, leaning on a bent leg hiked up on a nearby picnic bench. Apparently lost in thought, his thousand-yard stare peers through the men. Beyond the layers of barbed wire fencing can be spied a large green tractor, driven by a smiling heavy equipment operator. He is dragging the perimeter around the interior of the complex grounds, loosening dirt and spreading it in even lines. This stretch of earth must

be smoothed over regularly as a security measure, so that the footprints of any attempted escapee will cleanly register in the fresh soil. As the tractor rumbles closer, the sight of the drab buildings of the institution temporarily melts into the thick clouds of dust it kicks up.

The shoeshine looks on as I approach the metal detector at the main entrance. A rigid CO asks, "Any weapons, explosives, ammunition, cell phones, pagers, laptops, drugs, alcohol, currency over $40, or any other contraband?" I answer "No," empty my pockets into a plastic tub, and proceed through. A perimeter truck creeps by. The bulky pickup has bright spotlights bolted to its bed and a shotgun visibly mounted beside the driver. Birds chirp from coiling razor wire perches. A thick metal double-gate croaks open and I move forward through the security line. On the other side of the armored entrance, a prisoner throws open the door of a rickety shuttle bus. He is the driver. Another batch of night-shift COs and nurses emerge from the tram while incoming workers standby to board. Inside, the seats are hard plastic and it smells of coffee and sweat. As they step up, each rider announces their destination: "Hey, building 7." "Max yard." "Education." The driver nods solemnly. Every seat fills and one man stands.

The shuttle weaves smoothly between massive fading buildings—impenetrable, encased in steel and razor wire. We cruise along double layers of fences, 20 feet high and thick. Blinking red lights along the top signal that security systems are fully on-line.

The ride through the complex offers a more thorough tour of the division of penal labor. As the shuttle progresses to its first stop, we pass the complex laundry where more men in orange lug bulging burlap bags out of industrial-era green machines under glowing sulfur lights. We pass a row of men hunched over in a row at the side of the road, hacking at weeds and rocks with old rakes. In the distance, a yellow backhoe bounces across an

open expanse, an incarcerated operator bobbing behind the wheel. We approach another shuttle and the two drivers exchange a nod as they pass.

Through several layers of barbed wire fence sits the largest yard of the prison, where well over 1,000 men eat, sleep, and pass the time after each long day of work. At this moment, 100 or so stand together outside two massive gates. They are still waiting to be "turned out" for the day to head off to their work assignments. A bus with chipping white paint and barred windows waits on the outside for them to be passed through. Half will ride this bus to another area of the prison for work in the food factory—a food preparation warehouse where prisoners prepare lunches for the entire complex—to wrap sandwiches for the next six hours. The remainder will board another bus or a van to take them to other sites—the sign shop, the auto garage, the highway crews. On a different day I would view these "turn outs" from a closer vantage point. Prisoners waiting to be directed onwards shuffle around between the sally port gates. After 20 minutes, a CO emerges through a door to the small building connected to the secure entryway and waves them on. They quickly form a rough line and, one-by-one, stand before a small camcorder tripod, remove their hat, and state their name and number into the camera (a security measure implemented years ago, following the escape of a prisoner on an outside work crew who no longer resembled his ID photo, allowing him to elude local police). Some joke with other prisoners and with the COs. When the line moves slow, one man shouts out, "This is fucking ridiculous! I quit! Haha!" The CO behind the camera smiles and looks up, "Yeah, you better be playing." When the next man reaches his mark, another dares him, "Hey, sing like Aerosmith into the camera." After each prisoner recites his information, he shuffles

out the now-opened external gate and ascends the stairs to a bus waiting to transport them to work, wherever that may be.

Within the dust-worn buildings, others have already begun working. These are the men whose jobs take place on the yard—that is, within the confines of the secured area surrounding their housing bays. Not having to exit the gates means no long waits for the bus, no exposure to additional security staff, and no "strip shack" checks ("strip down, squat, cough") upon returning at the end of shift. Incarcerated tutors help civilian educators set up their classrooms. Porters mop; "knob polishers" polish doorknobs and brass fixtures; "butt collectors" empty dustpans of spent cigarettes picked from cracks in the pavement. HVAC teams and electrical crews troubleshoot utility malfunctions. Veteran advertising salesmen are already two hours into a 12-hour shift of cold-calling customers from the prison call center. Kitchen workers shovel out "late breakfast" to the non-working prisoners still on the yard. And, off of official prison books, those operating in the informal economy gamble, amass others' laundry to wash, clean up other men's bunks, and carefully craft artistic "hobbycraft" items—portraits, cards, or sculptures constructed with clever combinations of goods from the commissary store—to be sold in the underground economy.

These varied activities observed during a brief trip through the facility represent only a portion of the available positions at SSP yet highlight the diversity of work behind bars. Each offers its own combination of perks and drawbacks. Some informally function as punishments dished out to noncompliant or uncooperative prisoners. Others are awarded to the most skilled and enterprising of the carceral population. All of these jobs are

evaluated against one another by workers navigating the penal labor market. In the following section, I draw on their accounts to outline the labor hierarchy.

Evaluating Prison Jobs: Prisoner Labor as Stratified

Incarcerated laborers draw on various criteria to evaluate work programs. Many parallel those made by workers in the free world. According to Arne Kalleberg in his study of "good jobs" and "bad jobs" in the American economy, the *quality* of a job may be assessed by its rate of pay, skill level, degree of control or worker autonomy, security and stability, opportunities for advancement, and available perks or fringe benefits (Kalleberg 2011). While researchers in the sociology of work offer a thorough understanding of how workers evaluate the sites and conditions of their labor in the formal sector, such processes remain underexplored behind bars, despite work's central place in penal operations. Though similar in key ways, worker evaluations take unique shape when filtered through the prison context. In gauging the appeal of different prison jobs, the incarcerated weighed the nature of the work itself alongside the particular carceral conditions surrounding it. In what follows, I draw from accounts of working prisoners to construct a typology of "folk rankings" of prison jobs. The characteristics described below informed worker opinions regarding which jobs they might compete to secure, and which they might scheme to avoid.

Prisoner pay

First and foremost, wages were of primary concern. Some American states offer no pay for prisoners' mandated labors—a fact which has only contributed to the image of penal labor as a new form of slavery (Benns 2015; Blackmon 2008). Most prisons, like SSP, do provide some—if meager—payment. Yet, like in the free world, pay is far from uniform across work sites and between workers. At Sunbelt State, there persists a wide difference in pay between the lowest- and highest-paid prisoners. Those at the bottom rungs of the wage ladder receive $0.05 and $0.50 per hour, typically as compensation for deskilled tasks. For the majority of jobs at SSP, wages are capped at $0.50 per hour. To work one's way up to the maximum pay, a laborer must receive positive work evaluations, receive no disciplinary tickets, and secure a high school equivalency degree. A select few work programs are permitted to exceed this cap. In these rare jobs, the highest paid could receive over $1.00 per hour.

It was no coincidence that the work assignments considered the "best jobs" were also the best paying. At the call center, the starting pay for incarcerated salesmen well exceeded the max pay of most workers. If they meet their sales quotas and receive satisfactory reviews, they may receive quarterly raises. Similarly, those stationed in the sign shop earned between $0.50 and $1.00 hourly. They are eligible for a small raise after 90 days. After six more months of satisfactory reviews, pay is bumped again and, after another 12 months, up to the cap of approximately $1.00 per hour. Outside work crews like the highway cleanup and parks service teams automatically receive the standard cap. In these positions, all workers are paid a flat $0.50 per hour.

While hourly wages were salient to the incarcerated, other considerations affected workers' calculations of pay. For instance, departmental policies dictate that call center

workers, because of their markedly higher pay, be subjected to automatic deductions by the state to cover room and board costs (which prisoners referred to as "tax" or "rent"). This and select other sites were also required to set aside a percentage of wages into prisoner retention funds. These are savings accounts which may not be accessed until the time of a convict's release. Some viewed this system of forced-savings favorably—looking forward to the guarantee of some "start-up" money upon release. Marshall, for example, pursued a job in the call center for precisely this reason: "You get 27% of [your wage] to spend, 33% of it they put away, and the rest of it, DOC just takes for anonymous crap they make up as they go. But it's cool to know that every time I spend 60 bucks, I'm saving 60 bucks that I can't spend. No matter what I want to do, how I do it, it's *there*." Others preferred positions providing greater "take-home pay" for more immediate use. For instance, the prison sign shop and outside work crews, despite offering lower gross wages than the call center, enable workers to net a greater proportion of their pay, absent retention requirements and the higher mandatory deductions faced by call center workers.

Skill level

The skill requirement of a given work program carried considerable weight within the institution. As prison services decline throughout the country, skilled programming has become increasingly rare (Gottschalk 2010; Lynch 2010). Accordingly, the value of such positions has only risen behind bars. To prisoners at SSP, skilled jobs promised the potential to acquire or hone marketable skills to improve their prospects for labor market reentry upon release. One worker, Ben, related that he applied for a position in the prison

sign shop solely to build up his resume and "get real experience" to better his odds on the outside job market. "I didn't think I'd live past 30," he said. "So, I need a new plan for the *next* 30 years."

Skilled jobs are also likely to be more mentally demanding, making the hours in the day seemingly pass faster. This was important to prisoners, who frequently battled slow time during long sentences (Guilbaud 2010). "The perks of this job," said one skilled laborer, "is that…time goes by pretty fast. Days, weeks, months pass by like no other job." Skilled work also brought status on the yard for prisoners seeking distinction from those they deemed unskilled or unmotivated (referred to colloquially with terms like "cell warrior" or "youngster"). According to a skilled mechanic, in order to succeed in the auto garage, "You have to be a little bit more mechanically inclined and…at least be good working with your hands and willing to learn—and not be thinking that you know it all." This contrasted his image of the kitchens, of which he said: The basis "to [being] able to work in the kitchen is just *showing up*." Or, as one participant said of workers in the deskilled food factory, "You gotta have some drive [to get out of unskilled programs]. Lotta guys don't really have that—that's why they're stuck in there."

Correctional officers, too, valued skilled work programs, yet offered somewhat different—though parallel—reasoning. For some COs, skill training promised fewer repeat offenders, since those with newly-acquired skills were expected to be less likely to engage in criminal activity on the outs. While walking across the open expanse of the prison yard one day, a CO waved his arm out over the non-working prisoners scattered about. Many had not been assigned to work programing because they were deemed physically or psychological unable to perform basic work tasks; others had disciplinary records that

precluded them from participation in labor programs. According to the officer, however, these men who today spent daylight hours shuffling about the track encircling the yard, playing basketball, doing pushups and squats, or just sitting together in the shade, would have been hard at work several decades ago:

> OFFICER: 25 years ago, when I started at D.O.C. … We had carpentry jobs available, bricklaying—that's masonry—computer repair, uh, automotive. Row after row of jobs for inmates where they could *learn trades, skills*. That's what it *used* to be about.
>
> RESEARCHER: What's it about today?
>
> OFFICER: It's less of *that*, that's for sure.

Beyond the promise of decreasing recidivism, COs saw security benefits in skilled work. To them, these programs not only functioned to transfer skills, but also provided "a great incentive" because prisoners "have to have good behavior" in order to secure and maintain such assignments. One officer lamented that:

> We used to have a solar [installation job], where they learned how to install and repair solar panels. That was a great one—they really learned a good trade, *plus* it was a great incentive.

> … ‘Cause you had to have good behavior. I don’t know why they got rid of it. We *never* saw any problems over there.

More physically and mentally demanding labor was also expected to detract prisoners’ time and energy away from other, illicit behaviors. According to one staffer, “Work wears ‘em out, so by the end of the day, they’re exhausted—then you’ve got a good inmate.”

Worker autonomy

Prisoner movements and schedules are rigorously monitored and restricted. Any job promising greater freedom of movement around the work space or independence in taking breaks was highly valued. For some, this feature took some getting used to. In the engraving shop—where prisoners crafted fine plaques for D.O.C. and other state agencies—the daily flow of work depended largely on the frequency of orders that came through. During slow periods, workers were typically allowed to recline in their desk chairs and chat. Some played dominoes (referred to as “bones”) using handmade pieces crafted out of surplus plaque materials. Others played solitaire on a computer located within the shop. One afternoon, during a lull in the workday, I sat with Low-Light, a man who had been hired earlier that week. He told me about his experiences working various prison jobs across different yards and facilities over his 13 years behind bars. Higher-paying jobs “are the only ones where you can *survive* in here—[so] you can afford food and hygiene,” he informed me. “Otherwise, you’re relying on the state [to provide].” While we talked, the overseer of the work site walked through the door, looking to speak with one of Low-

Light's coworkers. Instinctually, he bolted upright in his chair and spun towards a nearby desk as if to look busy while the boss was in sight. When the coast was clear, he peered at the other engravers, who had not ceased their bones and solitaire games. With eyebrows raised, he confided:

> I'm still trying to feel my way around here. It's weird when it's slow—I get nervous when the boss comes around, seeing my sit. Like, 'Oh, shit, should I jump up [and work]??' But I think it's cool. Not like in the bakery. That was slave work over there. Always working, busting your ass. They'll jump down your throat if you slack off over there.

"Sounds bad," I replied. Shaking his head, he affirmed, "*Terrible*. You don't really get breaks—only every once in a while, if they decide you do. Sometimes you have to work through lunch. You eat [while you] work at some of the positions."

Beyond the autonomy to take breaks, Low-Light and other incarcerated laborers valued the freedom to move about the work site without constant monitoring. Some positions allowed workers to take breaks without hassle. Particularly despotic work sites, on the other hand, were known to limit prisoners' smoking, eating, and bathroom time, often arbitrarily. When a new worker at the food factory asked where the restroom was, one of the frontline staff members pointed him around the corner in the next room of the massive warehouse building. "There is always someone in there," he informed her. "Then please stand in the *line*," replied the staffer. Finding the bathroom occupied, as expected,

he stood alongside the wall and waited. A moment later, however, the supervising manager (the superior of the woman who instructed him to wait) emerged from her office. Spotting the man waiting for his chance in the bathroom, she instantly barked: "You can*not* stand around. You need to get back to work until the bathroom is open!" Marching behind him, she escorted him back as he trudged to his work station. Catching my gaze, he rolled his eyes at the scenario.

Incarcerated workers also valued being allowed input into the labor process. At SSP, certain positions provide relatively greater degrees of prisoner control over the day-to-day work proceedings as well as training procedures for new hires. Some skilled positions, in which many workers were already experts in the field (as Chapter 2 will discuss), enabled the incarcerated to train one another, rather than rely on staff. According to one senior staffer, this was a built-in feature of skilled sites. Such jobs were often "different" than most in that "they have skilled workers [and] less turnovers, so they can really teach some skills. And staggered tenure, so they can train one another."

Job stability

It was common for the imprisoned to be moved unexpectedly. They could be relocated to a new bunk without warning, "rolled up" in the middle of the night and transferred to a new yard within the facility, or transported to entirely new prisons or even new states without prior notice. Unpredictability, it would seem, is a central facet of punishment. As a result, any semblance of consistency or stability was appreciated by the prisoner population. In regard to work, this meant that work sites in which transfers,

demotions, and terminations were less frequent were prized. Carceral laborers may be hired, fired, promoted, demoted, get a raise, or get a pay cut at the discretion of whomever is the decision-maker overseeing them (on that particular day). With a touch of fatalism, one man sighed and said: "This is prison. They do what they want to us." Still, some positions did offer greater stability. At the top of the employment hierarchy, workers in higher-paying, skilled positions were often placed on institutional "hold," keeping them from being transferred to other housing yards, complexes, or states, save for rare security or disciplinary interventions. CO Bush, tasked with assigning prisoners to work and educational programing, said:

> You don't want these guys moving from skilled jobs—the sign shop, the call center. … So, I'll place a work hold on the skilled workers. They [DOC] can still move them, but it won't be part of *daily* movement. There better be a *reason* [if they are to be moved].

The risk of transfer remained an everyday possibility for those in positions lacking this protection.

Other prison work sites were notorious for high turnover and frequent demotions or restructuring. As one staff member put it, shuffling through the captive labor force was simple because "[we] don't have to have a paper trail to fire somebody." This was especially apparent in the food factory, where staff estimated a monthly turnover rate of

"about 20%." According to CO Byrne: "[I get] about two new guys each day, I'd say. … There's always somebody else for them to shoot in."

Internal mobility

While unexpected demotions and other expressions of arbitrary authority represented a strong negative feature of a prison job, workers did appreciate the ability to move between stations of their own accord. The opportunity for advancement or promotion within a work site was considered a significant perk and many skilled and unskilled programs alike housed various "stations" through which prisoners might progress.

One benefit of internal mobility is the option to learn or implement a wider variety of skills. As Eli looked forward to his release in 21 months, he shared his plan with me: "To learn every skill the [sign] shop has to offer—every station. … And this is the most enlightening [job] because the skills can be used on the outside. I tell new trainees, 'Learn *all* this. You can find a job on the outside. Find a little sign shop.'" Another perk of landing a position at a work site where one could navigate between stations or tasks was the opportunity to break up the monotony of day-to-day prison life. By hopping between stations over the years, one could ensure a more diverse prison experience (which was particularly important for those committed for long sentences).

Perks and fringe benefits

Numerous jobs boasted of more site-specific features in which incarcerated workers might find value. This included access to artistic or creative materials and outputs. One man, Jon, spent his down time in the sign shop constructing small jewelry boxes—complete with tiny functioning drawers and hinged components—to send home to his mother. He used leftover bits of cardboard (scavenged from the shipping counter, where completed signage orders are packaged to be mailed out) and affixed them using heavy duty tape or glue found in the shop. To decorate them, he used permanent markers (not available on the yard) and remnants of screen-printing ink and scraps of colored, adhesive-backed vinyl that he collected following finalized jobs. While prisoners were able to purchase arts and crafts supplies from a limited list at the commissary, the array of available materials that could be found around the shop was far superior (and could be acquired for free by those with access).

Jobs involving food preparation or distribution offered their own perks: access to snacks and supplementary rations. Chow line workers, tasked with dishing out dinner to other prisoners, were known to frequently stash away vegetables, cookies, and other edible goodies when they got the chance. Snacking on the job was almost a given at such sites. According to an incarcerated cook, Adam, "If I wanna drink a milk, I'm gonna drink a milk. … It's a perk of the job!" And, because they were charged with preparing each meal, kitchen workers were often able to secure additional chow. According to a prisoner named Willie, "There's perks to working in the kitchen—you get to eat before everybody else, and then [again] after. So, you get extra meals!"

Beyond enabling workers to consume snacks on the job, food prep positions also facilitated access to goods that could be smuggled and sold in the prison black market. The

overseers of the food factory constantly struggle to curb the theft of food. For some, such as the boisterous prisoner Santos, the act of stealing from his work site was often a highlight of the day. When I interviewed him, he provided details about recent smuggling endeavors. "I like the thrill," he shared. "I like that thrill of getting away and not getting caught."

Though more open with his enthusiasm than most, Santos' appreciation for the opportunity to "boost" food was representative of a broader trend. The informal economy of SSP was replete with cookies, chips, meats, and "black market zucchinis," bell peppers, and other fresh veggies smuggled out of the kitchens and food factory by enterprising risk-takers. For those ineligible or otherwise ill equipped to secure higher-paying jobs, securing access to a site from which they might pilfer in order to make extra money on the black market was a notable perk. For more details on the shadow economy of SSP, see Chapter 4.

Work environment

Prisoners also heavily weighed the subjective "general environment" of each workplace, drawing on shared evaluative criteria and rhetorical tools. Participants from divergent racial, ethnic, and age groups all valued, for instance, working in a space where they might feel "normal," receive "better treatment," and temporarily "escape" (at least in one's imagination) from the prison context. "It's not the job," maintained Gerald, "it's the environment" that matters. Good jobs, according to him, were those which were laid back and positive. According to Marshall, the top two characteristics of a "good job" are higher pay and the ability to "feel normal." Such positions enabled one to feel as if "you just *sleep*

at the prison," with your actual day being spent at a workplace. Or, as Lester said, a positive environment can make work feel "like a vacation from prison."

Hours spent at such work sites were considered doing "good time." Typically, it was work sites lacking a regular CO presence—with civilian staff members overseeing the workplace instead—that were referred to in this way. Bosses who were perceived as running the workplace "like a real job" rather than like a prison program were lauded. Ben, a long-time worker in the sign shop, noted, for instance, "Our bosses are *civilians*—they're cool. So that helps."

Staying on the yard

Another factor in the evaluation of prison jobs was a program's proximity to the housing units where prisoners spent their nights. There were several reasons to value securing a job "close to home." First, one could sleep more without needing to wake up early in order to catch the bus to work. Relatedly, not relying on the transport bus to get to work elsewhere in the institution (or, in the case of the outside crews, somewhere else in the region) meant potentially far less stress. Most prisoners are only paid for the time that they are at their work site, which means they may miss out on valuable wages if the morning bus is running late. According to Soto, prisoners "get screwed [if] the bus is late—it's not their fault [they're late], but they get their pay docked. … When you make fifteen cents an *hour*, that shit adds up."

Another benefit of not needing to exit the yard for work is that doing so involved greater and more frequent exposure to the often-severe security protocols of the institution.

Perhaps the most invasive example is the *strip shack*—a small building attached to the bus port through which every prisoner must pass and undergo a thorough strip search on entering or exiting the unit. As one man somberly put it: "I just want to stay in the yard, man. I'm tired of having them look at my butthole every day when I go to work." Some, however, willingly endured the indignity of frequent strip searches in pursuit of greater work opportunities. "Once you master that hurdle," said Lemmy, "you can start looking for better jobs—outside the yard." The outside work crews, for instance, were worth the strip shack experience, according to some, if only to access the open air of the free world.

Compromising positions

Finally, some positions were deemed problematic because being assigned to them might cause conflict for a worker. Some entailed one-on-one time with staff or involved directly "serving" officers or the institution. Positions such as shoeshine or staff barber were perceived to entail a degree of submission as workers directly serviced the needs of overseers. White prisoners at SSP collectively refused to work in either of these positions for this reason. "It's *degrading* to polish up an officer's boots," as one man maintained. These jobs also required interacting directly with correctional officers for a sustained period of time, often with no other prisoners around. As such, men who actively pursued such a position could be met with the suspicion that they were a "rat."

Many were actively forbidden on penalty of violence from accepting such positions. Prisoners, for instance, described the imperative to follow rules handed down from the race-based hierarchy—central to "prison politics" (e.g., Skarbek 2014)[12]—which

dictated their avoidance of particular jobs. “White guys aren’t allowed to be shoe shines,” I was told. “That’s what the heads on the yard decided.” To violate these rules was reportedly to risk “catching a hot one” (being punched), getting “hit” (more thoroughly assaulted), or worse at the hands of designated enforcers. “There’s rules in prison,” said one man. “[Violating them] will put my life in jeopardy.”

Another position prohibited by the “heads” who “called the shots” for each racial group was the fence crew. According to one high-ranking staffer, “That’s a real touchy one. Most of the guys, they get real *political* about putting up the fences to keep them in.” He went on: “It’s only the Mexican nationals that will agree to put them up. They’re like: ‘You have work, I’ll work.’ But that’s just the politics of the yards.” Similar conflicts arose around working for the welding crew. Prisoners were allowed to work as welders but were expected to refuse any orders to repair prison locks. Tasks of these sorts, which entailed repairing the “means of captivity,” were typically evaluated negatively. As one participant, Seth, rhetorically asked, “Why would a man build his own prison?”

There were, notably, some exceptions to these rules. The heavy equipment operators, for instance, regularly dragged the prison perimeter for security purposes, but this work was not forbidden by the heads. Nor was the work of fleet auto garage workers, who spent their days maintaining and repairing the very vehicles upon which COs relied to police the prisoner population. When I inquired into these apparent discrepancies, participants often made distinctions that to me seemed arbitrary. For example, mechanics justified their work on the premise that they also repaired the transport buses used to move them throughout the facility, making their work necessary to ensure that “*our people* are safe.”

Folk Rankings of Prison Jobs

In an attempt to organize participant accounts of different work offerings at SSP, Table 2 presents a schema of *folk rankings*. Different agents sometimes privileged different features in their assessments of work, but most relied on some combination of the considerations outlined above. Many programs were appraised in broad strokes. For instance, certain jobs were likely to be referred to as "good" or "the best" (e.g., "That is the best job going" or, more colorfully, "This job is gold"); others evoked classification as "bad" or "the worst" (e.g., "That's the worst job I ever had" or, with greater specificity, "It's bullshit over there—they don't pay good and they'll work the hell out of you").

Piecing these accounts together, I adopt the language of "tiers" to capture patterns in how different positions were described. Rather than representing concrete classifications, this folk ranking system instead considers standings in more general terms. In doing so, it sets the stage for future chapters to explore how jobs along this hierarchy are allocated, and the outcomes of such processes.

Work programs in the prison labor hierarchy at SSP fell broadly into three categories. The bottom tier contains primarily jobs which are unskilled and low paying, or which have otherwise been deemed problematic by prisoners. These typically met few if any of the positive standards outlined above. In many cases, participants near-unanimously derided them as "bad jobs." Examples include scrubbing tiles on the floor crew, cleaning toilets as a porter, tarring roofs, working in the laundry room, or collecting cigarette butts.

Workers in such jobs often reported feeling "trapped," with little hope of advancing to better opportunities. Some of these positions were assigned as punishment. On formal disciplinary paperwork, this sanction was listed as "extra duty." Raking rocks as a "rake-pusher" on the prison grounds crew stands as an example. According to one worker, Hoke, the job typically goes to "guys that screw up." In this sense, "screwing up" referred to failure to comply with work assignments, unwillingness to follow instructions, or refusal to demonstrate deference or "work ethic." A CO who had been tasked with supervising the grounds crew related that, "Some people just—I hate to say it this way—they just come in here more *ghetto*. They want to go exploit the system, get over on somebody." He would later note, "Grounds crew [is for] trouble-makers. It's like an informal punishment."

Negative assessments of some work programs initially appeared counterintuitive. For example, working as a shuttle driver seemed, at the start of fieldwork, like a good prison job: it allowed prisoners the ability to drive, it was officially considered a skilled position, and drivers might be afforded some privacy between routes, which was hard to come by behind bars. Yet, the drawbacks of the position became clear after speaking to prisoners in the know. Franklin, a former shuttle driver, shared that drivers were frequently subjected to intense scrutiny from staff member passengers:

> It's the easiest [job] to get a [disciplinary] ticket at. Officers—if they're having a bad day, you could have a *bad* day. The shuttles hold a capacity of 15 people, but at shift change, there could be 25, 26 people who want on. And they don't care if they're standing—they just cram on. Do I have

> the authority to tell them, 'Sorry, it's at capacity'? No! But if I have to slam on the brakes and someone falls over, that's an assault charge! That's the games they like to play.

Later observations confirmed Franklin's description. Staff members often piled into shuttles, exceeding posted capacity. Every bump and sharp turn risked the vehicle lurching and a passenger falling. Additionally, staff members regularly requested stops deviating from the standard routes. This put drivers in a difficult position between their passengers and supervisors, all of whom had the ability to sanction them. The pay and hours were also undesirable. Drivers' pay was topped at $0.25 hourly, far below the standard cap. What's more, they worked 11½ hour shifts, three days weekly, making for tiring work and long periods of down time on off days.

The middle tier of the prison employment system hierarchy contains jobs boasting some desirable features (e.g., skill training), but lacking in other valued areas (e.g., higher pay). Many of these positions elicited mixed sentiments from the prisoner population. Outside work crews, for instance, were highly regarded by some for the guaranteed pay of $0.50 per hour as well as the opportunity to venture outside of prison walls on a regular basis. This was not a universal consensus, however. Many regarded the outside crews as undesirable for the low degree of autonomy—not surprisingly, prisoners were even more heavily surveilled off of prison grounds by supervising COs. They were also regularly counted by COs serving as "checkers" who visited each crew multiple times daily. These positions also lacked stability. It was quite easy to get fired from the outside crews and many shared stories of being unexpectedly terminated for unclear or inconsistent reasons.

The labor itself was also sometimes disparaged for being grueling, monotonous, or "tedious."

Operators, who handled heavy machinery around the complex, are also captured by this middle category. Qualified heavy equipment operators were hard to come by in the prison and staff members prized—and often competed for—them. The ability to drive was considered a primary perk of this job, offering an element of freedom as well as momentary privacy while traversing institutional grounds, dragging for weeds. Yet, the position was sometimes disliked for its instability. Like the outside crews or tram drivers, it was relatively easy to get fired, according to operators. There were also no opportunities for advancement, resulting in a somewhat static work experience over long years behind bars. Other skilled positions were regarded in a similar light. The carpentry and welding shop was referenced as a "fine" work site for those entering prison with the proper skills. The HVAC crew, tasked with maintaining and repairing heating and cooling units throughout the institution, and the electrical crew reportedly offered enjoyable work but were not typically regarded as the "best" positions available. In what were sometimes considered "white collar" work sites, tutors, aides, and clerks directly assisted staff members with educational or office work. Though considered skilled, such positions allowed for very little autonomy or mobility. These also involved sustained one-on-one interactions between prisoners and staffers, leading many to eye such jobs—and the prisoners who accepted them—with suspicion.

Table 2. Folk Rankings of Prisoner Work Programs							
	Work Site	**Hourly Pay**	**Management, Oversight**	**Skilled / Semi-Skilled**	**High Autonomy**	**High Stability**	**High Internal Mobility**
Top Tier	Sign Shop	Highest take-home ($0.50 - $1.00)	State	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Call Center	Highest gross (over $1.00)	Private Firm	✓	✓	✓	✓
Middle Tier	Outside Crews (Public Works, Highway Crew)	High (flat $0.50)	State				
	Education Tutor	Standard ($0.05 - $0.50)	State	✓		✓	
	Staff/Office Aide	Standard	State	✓			
	Program Clerk	Standard	State	✓			
	Library Clerk	Standard	State	✓			
	Forklift Operator	Standard	State	✓		✓	
	Inmate Barber	Standard	State	✓			
	Fleet Services Garage	Standard	State	✓ Unskilled – Skilled		✓	
	Operator/Heavy Equipment	Standard	State	✓	✓		
	Wastewater	Standard	State	✓	✓		
	Welder	Standard	State	✓		✓	
	HVAC	Standard	State	✓		✓	
	Carpenter	Standard	State	✓			
	Plumber	Standard	State	✓			
	Electrician	Standard	State	✓			
Bottom Tier	Yard Crew (Rake-Pusher / Butt Collector)	Standard	State				
	Recreation Clerk	Standard	State				
	Commissary	Standard	Private Firm				
	Laundry	Standard	State				
	Grounds Crew	Standard	State				
	Clean-Up Crew	Standard	State				
	Porter/Janitor	Standard	State				
	Floor Crew	Standard	State				
	Trash Collector	Standard	State				
	Roof Repair	Standard	State				
	Maintenance Helper	Standard	State				
	Painter	Standard	State				
	Warehouse	Standard	State				
	Fence Crew	Standard	State				
	Tram (Shuttle) Driver	Low ($0.25 cap)	State	✓			
	Staff Barber	Standard	State	✓			
	Shoe Shine	Standard	State	✓			
	Kitchen Worker/Server	Standard	Private Firm				
	Food Factory	Standard (most low)	Private Firm	✓ Unskilled – Semi-Skilled			

Finally, the few rare "top-tier" work sites are those that possess virtually all of the positive features that workers described. These were consistently regarded as the "best" available options and were highly competitive. Though the outside work crews and some skilled positions were held in high regard by many prisoner participants, only two work sites were near-universally praised. These were the call center and the sign shop. In addition to being the highest-paid offerings at Sunbelt State, both promised to keep workers occupied with skilled, engaging work tasks. Each, too, was known for according prisoners a greater degree of autonomy than could be found elsewhere. Furthermore, the sign shop and call center offered relatively high levels of stability and opportunities for prisoners to navigate between work stations.

Four Prison (Field)Work Sites

The remainder of this chapter will take a more in-depth look at four particular work programs: the food factory, fleet services garage, sign shop, and call center (see Table 3). Future chapters will explore processes of assigning, pursuing, managing, and carrying out work at Sunbelt State Penitentiary by drawing on extended observations at these programs. These four sites were chosen because they represent key positions on the perceived hierarchy of prisoner jobs. The food factory is a model "bad prison job." It was selected to represent the lowest tier of penal labor because (1) newly-processed prisoners often began their penal labor careers at this high-volume site, (2) it housed unskilled (indeed, fully deskilled) work stations as well as semi-skilled positions, precipitating mobility and

distinction strategies, and (3) it was characteristically referred to as the worst prison job, rendering visible prisoners' collective sources of discontent. Next, the fleet auto garage is a median position, eliciting mixed reviews from participants. It too contained both unskilled and skilled work opportunities, allowing greater insights into processes of mobility and distinction within as well as between work sites. Finally, the sign shop and call center were selected on the basis of being considered the best available offerings. From these sites, I could observe the top positions to which incarcerated laborers aspired. Additionally, both skilled, higher-paying programs promised a variety of perks; yet, the sign shop involved "blue collar" labor in the form of fabrication and printing, while the call center entailed the "white collar" work of sales.

Table 3. Prison Work Program Fieldsites		
	Managed by State	*Managed by Private Firm*
Higher Desirability	Sign Shop	Call Center
Lower Desirability	Fleet Auto Garage	Food Factory

These four sites also represent variation in terms of privatization. Work is often absent from public debates on prison policy and practices; however, when it is discussed, the focus is often on the privatization of prisoner labor (e.g., Chang and Thompkins 2002; Eidelson 2017; McGrew and Hanks 2017). By examining privately-managed penal work programs alongside state-run programs, I positioned myself to be able to observe what—if any—notable differences in prisoner experiences or understandings of work emerged along these lines. While I initially expected this to be an important division on-the-ground, what

I found was, at most, ambivalence. Good and bad prison jobs existed on both sides of the public-private divide and this factor was rarely mentioned by participants.

The food factory and call center were distinct in many ways in the eyes of working prisoners but were similar in that each was managed by private firms contracting prisoner labor through public-private partnerships with the institution. As such, both were overseen by staff members employed by their respective firms rather than the state. Conversely, the fleet garage and the sign shop were considered "state" jobs because each was managed by a team of state employees. The garage was overseen by two civilian employees of the Department of Corrections in addition to a correctional officer who provided on-site security and controlled the use of tools. The sign shop was managed by three employees of the state's Correctional Industries division (a public program instituted by the state legislator designed to utilize industry-style management strategies to coordinate certain labor programs within public facilities). Focusing fieldwork on sites that intersect along these criteria enabled me to move beyond debates over the positive or negative aspects of prison privatization to instead emphasize processes and structures cutting across such features.

Food factory

The bottom tier position eliciting the strongest negative consensus was the food factory. Over 18 months, I heard it repeatedly referred to as "terrible," "forced labor," "the worst job," a "trap" or "trick" job, "probably the lowest job there is," and other invectives from both prisoners and staff. Incarcerated participants cited many factors in their negative

evaluations of the site, including the low pay, poor treatment ("they treat everyone like shit!"), despotic oversight (via heightened surveillance, frequent revocation of scheduled breaks, and heavy restriction of movement), and limited or poor training ("it's *supposed* to be '*corrections!*'"). On this latter point, several staff members agreed. One food factory civilian employee stated, "I think the *only* jobs that benefit them [prisoners] are ones with skills." He gestured to a group of prisoners rolling lunch meat and continued: "This work? It doesn't help them. But they have to do it. Nobody wants to work here, so we get the worst of the worst."

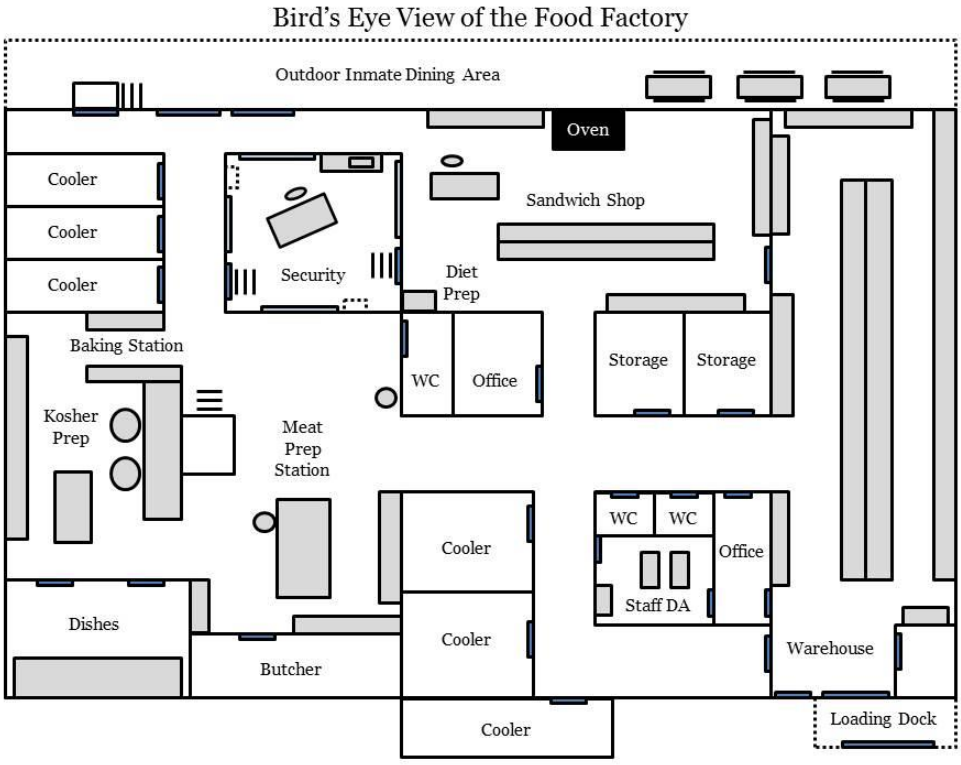

Figure 2. Bird's Eye View of the Food Factory

The food factory was largely considered a punishment job—one that "catches people that don't succeed." Rollins and LD, both long-time workers in the prison sign shop who got their prison labor starts in the food factory, were explicit about its reputation:

ROLLINS: *Oooh*, let me just say that the discontent *rises* the further you go down the chain.

LD: Not to disparage any other inmates working—

ROLLINS: Right. There's just still an employment hierarchy.

LD: The thing I like here [the sign shop] is being busy for 8 hours, but it's not hard on my body. But the [programming] officer just throws people in the food factory. Matter of fact, if you get fired from here, you get sent there as *punishment* 9 times out of 10. The last 4 or 5 guys who messed up here got their [job assignment letter] sending them to the food factory the *next day*.

It was certainly common to see new faces around the food factory each week. Prisoners were not allowed to quit the job, but they might be fired (temporarily, at least) along with other sanctions if they refused to board the morning bus or excessively violated work rules.

One staff member attributed the high turnover to the low pay: "Here, they get a dime an hour—nobody wants to stick around for that." Though the food factory offered the standard pay range of $0.05 to $0.50 per hour, most prisoners received the lower end of this. As another staff member put it: "Most of these guys make fifteen if they're lucky. This is the *bottom* of the *bottom*."

The daily labor at the food factory was monotonous and sometimes strenuous. This is where bagged lunches—"bag nasties," colloquially—for the entire prison were produced. During particularly busy shifts, when many days' worth of orders needed to be readied in advance, the food factory could ship out up to 60,000 meals. To enable this massive workload, it occupied an expansive warehouse building, subdivided into four primary stations: the storage warehouse, freezers, sandwich shop, and meat prep. Smaller stations, including a bakery, "diet prep" station, and dishwashing room, were nested within these larger areas.

Entering the food factory through the loading dock door, one is struck by the sight and smell of hundreds of pallets of sliced bread, stacked five-feet high in columns along the warehouse periphery. Shelving units line the walls and cut across the middle of the long, high-ceilinged storage area. This warehouse station—which one prisoner called the "fishing docks"—was a nexus through which all incoming ingredients and outgoing prepared meals passed. Prisoners referring to themselves as "warehousemen" scurried back and forth lugging large boxes of newly-arrived food items or sliding stacked pallets from other stations towards the exit. Incoming deliveries often contained up to 40,000 pounds of food. Jerri, the civilian manager of the food factory, could often be found looking on as beeping delivery trucks backed up to the open sliding bay door. A former CO, she now

worked for the private firm providing food services at SSP. Also a fixture of the warehouse was Donald, a black prisoner adorned in orange with tattered shirt neck and sleeves. As I worked alongside the warehousemen loading and unloading pallets one day, he shouted instructions to the other prisoners working beside him: "This order needs sacks [bagged lunches] for Wednesday. Load them up on *this* truck! Save those ones there for the *next* truck." The fast-moving warehouse was considered by some to be one of the better assignments within the food factory, relatively speaking. One key participant, Dean, would tell me that this was because time seemed to go by quicker on the hectic loading docks, since "we have so much to do and it has to get done by a certain time." Some took pride in the fact that their work "helps run the whole prison"—a beneficial outlook in the face of the "just general shittiness" (in the words of one quiet warehouseman) of the otherwise overbearing food factory.

Through swinging double doors—past a "Wet Floor" cone on which someone scrawled "JUST FOR SHOW" in an artistic act of resistance—and down a narrow hallway, a chill breeze blows steadily from the freezer section, or "Alaska," as some prisoners joked. Halogen lights reflect dully off of giant steel doors. A worker in an orange sweatshirt and beanie emerges grasping a large box of cabbages. He plops it down on a wooden pallet outside the walk-in and another prisoner adorns it with a small sticker indicating the date. An onlooking "white shirt" (the term for the prison's civilian food service employees) ticks something off on his clipboard.

Around the corner is the largest room of the food factory, the "sandwich shop." Its walls are yellowing and the gray concrete floor is bisected by two long, narrow tables. About 25 prisoners are lined up shoulder-to-shoulder around them, wrapping together all

of the elements of that day's "bag nasties" with plastic wrap. The basic lunch-making process was thoroughly deskilled: a prisoner pulls out a long stretch of plastic wrap from the box before him, slaps down 4 slices of bread, rolls it once, puts a bag of chips on top of that, rolls it once more, then adds two slices of cheese (on days with cheese), two cookies, two condiment packets, and (sometimes) a powdered flavored drink packet. These wrapped packages are placed on nearby racks in neat, precisely counted rows. The racks then go to another crew which adds rolled meat to the bundle and wraps it up into its final form before it is eventually stacked and loaded onto trucks to be shipped out to work crews and housing units for distribution. This deskilled routine was "zombie work," according to a participant called Stavo.

In the back corner of the sandwich shop, two aging Latino men softly sing sad sounding songs in Spanish while tying tiny baggies of peanut butter. Another holds his gloved hands and forearms out before his face—wrapped tightly from wrist to elbow in plastic wrap—inspecting them like a surgeon preparing to operate. Satisfied that there are no gaps exposing his skin, he dips his arms up to the elbow into a comically large bowl of peanut butter, slowly stirring in a blob of jelly by hand. The peanut butter and jelly must be pre-mixed, I would learn, so that prisoners could not use the sugary jam to brew alcoholic "hooch." Prisoners in the food factory are not allowed to handle sharp tools, so the men stand patiently until CO Byrne, the only correctional staff at the work site, appears with a knife to slice open additional bags of grape jelly. "Hurry up and pour that one in!" he shouts. When the guys say something quickly to one another in Spanish, he barks: "English!" He shakes his head at me as if to say, "Can you believe this?" and marches away toward the "tool cage" in his office to return the blade.

After securing the tool, CO Byrne peers down at the meat prep station, where around 15 prisoners roll slices of slimy meat or feed large blocks of bologna into meat slicers. A wet, cold, salty smell pervades. The basic process mirrors that of the sandwich shop: pull out a stretch of plastic wrap, slap down two slices of ham (or, depending on the day, sliced bologna or turkey ham, known as "t-ham") onto the plastic, give this a quick two or three rolls of plastic, rip the plastic off the roll, and toss the completed product—a slick pink cylinder of meat—into a nearby tub. The first time I participated in this task, a gangly prisoner called Milo leaned in to offer a tip: "Try wrapping the ends in like a burrito, then give it a few more rolls. So it won't come undone." Observing Slick, the de facto inmate "boss" of this station, I learned that a plastic spork functions well to more cleanly slice the plastic after rolling, rather than ripping it off at the end by hand and risking a vertical tear. The thin plastic gloves were more ceremonial than functional. Meat juices coated them inside and out, making it increasingly difficult to grip the slippery plastic wrap.

At the neighboring meat prep table, prisoners tied bags containing sliced turkey. One man, the curly-haired Baldwin, appeared particularly adept at this. "Dude, I got mad baggie skills. I'm fucking good at meat wrapping," he boasted. "I roll dope, dude. That's why." An older coworker, Stahl, shook his head. "That's nothing to brag about, dude. That's why you're in here in the first place, probably. You gotta knock that shit off or else you'll end right back up in here." Baldwin did not reply, but his slight grin betrayed him. Time crept slowly as we continued these deskilled, monotonous movements until a 15-minute break at 9:45am.

At the periphery of the meat prep station sits the "bakery," a corner station where two prisoners knead biscuit batter on large metal pans while another prepares the next batch

of dough in an industrial mixer. Unlike most of the stations in the food factory, this is labelled a "semiskilled" position. Craig, who readily revealed himself as the "lead baker," leans heavily into a rolling pin and flattened out the edges of the dough on his pan. Pausing, he holds up his rolling pin to me—"You see *this*?" It is not a rolling pin at all, but rather a cardboard cylinder salvaged from a spent roll of plastic wrap. They have no handles; workers must curve their hands with fingers firmly clasped and push hard to make the cardboard roll forward through the dough. With a chuckle, he cocks his head and gives the "roller" a sarcastically-inquisitive look. "Can you believe that?" he asks. "Million-dollar corporation—*million*-dollar corporation and they can't spring for rollers! They can, but they *won't*." He shakes his head and leans back into his work.

The other semiskilled position in the food factory is that of "diet prep cook." Located in a corner of the sandwich shop, three prisoners here prepare bagged lunches for men with dietary restrictions. This includes 58 "wasting" meals for dangerously underweight prisoners, 11 vegan meals (peanut butter and white bread), 27 "soft" meals for those with no teeth, four gluten free meals, 28 low sodium "renal" meals for men on dialysis (egg salad and white bread), 20 "allergy" meals (rice, celery, lettuce, and apple sauce), and 10 "control" meals (egg salad and wheat bread). Another small crew of diet prep cooks prepared 24 kosher meals from a secluded area in the back near the dishwasher, in order to protect from cross-contamination with non-kosher meals or ingredients.

In all, between 80 and 90 prisoners are employed at any given time in two overlapping shifts at the food factory. The first crew arrives at 6:30am and works until 12:30pm (or "oh-six-hundred to twelve-thirty," in institutional parlance). In the mornings, they file in almost silently, shuffle towards their assigned stations, and set up their supplies

for the day—large spools of plastic wrap in the sandwich shop and meat prep, plastic aprons and metal pans in the bakery, work gloves in the warehouse and freezers. They do all of this quietly, without instruction. White and Latino prisoners set up at opposing ends of the long middle table in the sandwich shop, clustering in respective groups. A group of black prisoners set up at another table off to the side.

The bus transporting the second shift, who are scheduled to work 7:30am to 1:30pm ("oh-seven-thirty to thirteen-thirty"), is often late. The manager, Jerri, would tell me:

> It happens sometimes. Could be an [incident] at the yard. Or an illness. Could be the CO at the gate is being a knucklehead. The inmates get mad if it's that—if the CO at the gate is holding them up. When you work for cents an hour, 15 minutes late is a big deal!

When the bus finally arrives, the crew rushes in. Unlike the first group, these men flood into the sandwich shop shouting, singing loudly, laughing. They set up their materials slowly. Once everyone has entered, the white, black, and Latino groups cluster again with their respective cliques. Once spaces at the center tables have filled up, a few white prisoners set up at the small table beside the black workers. Shaking his head, CO Byrne says, "I put all the *slackers* on the second shift. That way, when they show up, the rest of the group is already working. The good workers get set up fast."

One or two civilian "white shirts" oversee each station. They often remain relatively fixed in position throughout the day. The CO, on the other hand, marches quickly from the

sandwich shop to the meat prep to the freezers to the warehouse, making regular visual counts of his full crew through tinted glasses. He is typically heard before he is seen. Even in the din of the work day, the quick rhythm of his keys is audible around the corner, their weighted jingle cut off with each brisk step. Like many COs, he appears led by his belt—radio, keys, and pepper spray almost propelling him, shoulders and arms stiffly keeping the rest of his body in line. At times, he and a white shirt clash over procedure or rule enforcement. Jerri attributed the occasional struggles between COs and civilian staff to differences in training. "Officers go through boot camp. Contractors only do nine days of simple training, but the officers expect them to respond at the same level if something goes down." As a former CO herself, she often acted as a bridge between white shirts and officers. Such conflicts, when they emerged, were relegated to the staff dining area, in the "back stage" of the food factory. Outside of this space, however, the combined staff sought to present a "unified front" before their prisoner crew.

Fleet services garage

Not far from the food factory stands the fleet services auto garage. Here, a seven-prisoner crew is tasked with servicing every vehicle in use at the prison, ranging from pickup truck to tractor, electric golf cart to hulking transport bus. As one Sergeant would put it, "These men work on every vehicle. Every [prison] vehicle comes through here. We depend on them." And, despite being in the shadow cast from the food factory on a sunny day, the garage offers quite a different work experience. "The food factory is more like

forced labor," said the Sergeant. "None of those guys really wants to work there. But here, these guys want this job."

This site was similar to other skilled positions in that it offered the standard rate of pay, an engaging work experience, and relative stability for its skilled workers. Incarcerated auto mechanics commonly possessed prior mechanical experience. The "car wash" out back, however, employed unskilled workers (more often than not pulled from the ranks of foreign nationals). Additionally, a clerk was employed to maintain inventory counts and process work order paperwork. In general, the garage was regarded as a fine enough place to work, but still, as one mechanic named Danny put it, "Not a lot of people seem to want this job." The frequent exposure to correctional staff of all ranks, who were a regular presence as they dropped off and picked up departmental vehicles throughout each day, was likely to blame for much of the general disinterest in this program.

When a vehicle is due for standard maintenance, or when more serious repairs were needed, this is where staff members of SSP head. Between the hours of 6:00am and 1:00pm, a small crew of five imprisoned mechanics populated the two-bay garage. Two civilian staff members, employees of the state, tracked incoming and outgoing vehicles from a central office. Graham, the man in charge, was often stoic. Though generally patient, he did not stand for second-guessing from his prisoner employees—"He's god around here," as one man put it. Boyle was his second in command. When not completing paperwork, he could often be found strolling around the garage, looking in on prisoners' progress and making small talk. In addition, an on-site CO named Peña patrolled the garage and the surrounding area in addition to maintaining the inventory of tools from his small office in the locked tool room. Over 1,000 tools were in his charge. Every morning, he

checked out the standard equipment to mechanics and each afternoon re-catalogued the inventory. At SSP, there were two classifications of tools: Class A tools are those that might be used to aid in an escape. Things like files or wire cutters fit this classification and must be more closely monitored. Class B tools are those deemed *not* capable of aiding escape and include things like screwdrivers, rakes, or, somewhat counterintuitively, pickaxes.

Each day, anywhere between two and 20 vehicles could be dropped off for maintenance. When a new vehicle arrived, Graham and Boyle determined what repairs were needed and filled out the necessary work orders. This paperwork was then handed along with the keys to the vehicle over to a mechanic, who retrieved the vehicle from outside, raised it up on the vehicle lift, and got to work.

The garage was split into two bays, each with its own vehicle lift and toolset. Two mechanics in the eastern half of the garage, called Bay B, primarily serviced the complex's cars and trucks. On the west side, two others maintained the vans and shuttle buses on the shop's larger vehicle lift. Though the two halves of the garage were similarly equipped, there did appear to exist a status hierarchy based on tenure. "I generally put the guys who have worked here a while into Bay A," said Graham. As the de facto "head mechanic" among the incarcerated crew, Gael was in charge of this area. With the longest tenure in this work site as well as the most extensive experience as a mechanic on the outs, he seemed a natural fit for this role. Graham and Boyle often delegated to him in deciding which worker should complete which task, and in which order. Similarly, if workers had questions regarding a job, they often approached him before their civilian bosses.

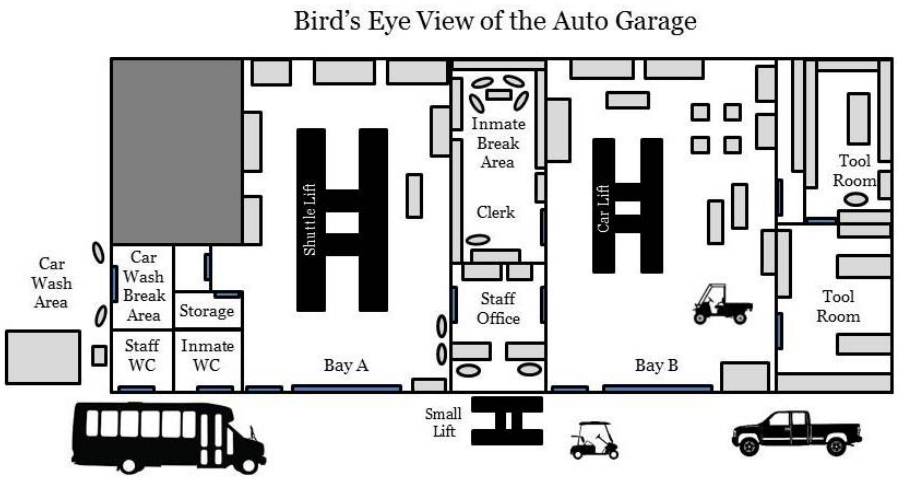

Figure 3. Bird's Eye View of the Auto Garage

The most common tasks around the garage were "routine service checkups" completed for preventative maintenance every 6,000, 18,000, and 36,000 miles. A checklist guided prisoners through numerous services, although all but the newest mechanics knew the routines by heart. An "A service" entailed a basic oil change and fluid check. "D services" were the most involved, requiring an oil change and fluid check, as well as more advanced maintenance like filter replacements or transmission tests. The storage area, which doubled as the prisoner break room, was well stocked with the necessary motor oil, belts, air filters, and other basics for completing these checkups. Non-routine repairs were often more difficult to complete, however, because the requisite parts and supplies were often in short supply. Boyle was in charge of balancing the garage budget and ordering necessary supplies, but financial limitations often kept him from maintaining a surplus. "I'm running around like a head with my chicken cut off," he said in regard to the constant inventory juggling act.

When supplies approached depletion (common near the end of each fiscal quarter), mechanics often had to get creative in order to keep the fleet running. One overcast morning

I arrived to find Danny mulling over a van's broken brake booster in front of Bay B. Meanwhile, in Bay A, Gael tried to find the source of a leak in another van. With funds stretched thin, the office was unable to order new parts to repair either. Instead, the prisoners decide to take parts from one vehicle (the brake booster) and put it into the other. While one would need to be taken out of commission until the funds came in to fix *both* of its issues, the other now had what it needed to be successfully processed. Peering over inventory spreadsheets in the central office, Boyle later told me that this was one of many examples of "robbing Paul to pay Peter" to get the vans fixed. To keep the shop running smoothly, he documented every movement of parts carefully—in his words, "dotting my T's and crossing my I's…or, you know what I'm trying to say."

In addition to the hierarchy between the Bays, there existed a spatial distinction between mechanics, who worked inside the garage, and the car washers, who worked from a small paved area outside the building. Raul, a broad shouldered Mexican national who wore scratched sunglasses and a tattered straw hat, had worked in the car wash the longest. He could often be found sitting in the shade, staring out toward the fences in silence, awaiting the arrival of COs with vehicles in need of cleaning. With a nearby hose and long-handled brushes dipped in a mop bucket of soapy water, he and his partner, the silent Nacho, thoroughly scrubbed down cars, vans, trucks, and buses seven hours per day. For "full service" washes, they wiped down and vacuumed vehicle interiors—a particularly difficult challenge when hair-filled K9 Unit trucks rolled through. Car washers were exposed to certain burdens that mechanics were protected from inside the shop. For one, they were exposed to the elements. On bad weather days, they could be found leaning closely against the outside wall for rain cover. In addition, they were subject to the

oversight of every prison staffer who came through, putting them under greater scrutiny than those inside the Bays. While mechanics worked safely indoors, overseen by Graham and Boyle, car washers would often receive orders from passing COs to perform duties outside of their job description, such as clearing the open expanse between the prison fences of all trash and debris. With no recourse against commands exceeding his basic job description, Raul often had no choice but to comply. Though Graham expressed frustration when other staffers give orders to his workers, he had limited authority to stop it from happening when he was not present.

A major perk of work in the fleet garage was the ability to learn or, more often, hone previously-acquired mechanical skills. Yet, as in many work sites at SSP, the garage did not rely on or teach truly up-to-date skillsets. Instead, its workers performed an increasingly outdated form of auto work that may not be marketable on the outside. According to Boyle, the prisoners here might be mechanics, but they were not *technicians:*

BOYLE: That's what we're called now: 'techs.' 'Cause auto repair is all tech now—it's working with computers. We're not 'mechanics' or 'grease monkeys' anymore!

RESEARCHER: Are these guys trained to be technicians?

BOYLE: No. Not a lot of tech work coming through here.

Graham would reiterate the growing need for technical skills in today's auto garages: "We put a man on the moon with crappier computers than what we put in these vehicles nowadays."

Still, other perks made the garage an enjoyable work space for its small crew. For instance, unlike most prisoners, these men occasionally had the opportunity to operate vehicles. Every car, van, and truck was driven onto the vehicle lift by a crewmember. Upon completion of necessary servicing, each was taken on a short test drive around the building. Golf carts were used to transport heavier objects from Bay to Bay, or to transport trash to a distant dumpster. The sight of a gleeful prisoner zooming around the corner in a golf cart was a daily occurrence in the fleet garage. Another unexpected perk that prisoners referenced was access to a "good microwave." Unlike those available in the prison housing units (or "runs"), the microwave in the garage was relatively new and was quickly repaired or replaced when broken. "Over in the run, it's been broken for two months," Raul recounted. "They say, 'Oh, we're waiting for back order.' Ok, sure. But *here* [in the garage]? Graham gets a replacement like *that!*" In the break room, prisoners maintained a coffee pot and, sometimes, a stash of crumbled cookies secured from the nearby food factory. Mechanics had frequent access, though car washers were sometimes unable to leave their outside station long enough or soon enough to secure a cup of fresh brewed coffee.

Call center

The SSP call center sells television advertising to businesses across the country. It is operated by a private firm with offices across several states. The firm contracts with the Department of Corrections for the prisoner labor as well as the on-site office space. Between 30 and 35 prisoners were employed here at any given time. The full work shift stretched from 5:30am until 5:30pm, though workers had the autonomy to leave earlier if they chose. In addition to their standard prison ID cards, call center workers carried special work IDs with which to clock in and out each shift and during optional 15-minute breaks at 8:00am, 10:00am, and 2:00pm, and a mandatory 30-minute lunch break at 12:00pm. During work hours, these men made cold call advertising sales, never revealing their identity as prisoners. With the highest hourly wage, this work site starts pay at over $1.00 per hour, with quarterly wages that exceeded what most positions offered. For these and other reasons, this was regularly referred to as "the best job," though sometimes with the caveat "to make money at."

The call center was able to offer such high wages because it is privately run and managed, excluding it from DOC regulations regarding wage caps for incarcerated workers. Private oversight also allowed for a less overbearing environment (although it did not guarantee one, as evidenced by the food factory, which was also privately operated). Many attested that the office was organized and run more "like a business," engendering the feeling of working in a "real" call center in the free world. Like real call centers, however, the prison office required prisoners to meet monthly sales quotas, resulting in high early turnover and often creating a stress-filled atmosphere, especially in the days before deadlines (resembling the pressures of call center labor in the free world; Sallaz 2015). Newcomers were required to secure one sale within the first two weeks. After that,

each was expected to maintain a $5,000 per month minimum in sales (referred to as "five to survive"). Roughly one in five new hires made it to their third month.

For many, this stress was reportedly made worth it by the pay and by the ability to correspond with the free world via phone and email.[13] According to one worker, Javi, the call center was the "best job by far" because it enabled workers "to exercise your social abilities. The money's not bad either—because *that's* the point. [But] it feels like a *real job.*" Another worker, called Ghost, would add that working in the call center helped him prepare to "transition back into society" since operating the phones required confidence and eased him into "socializing with people on the outside." The skilled nature attributed to call center work also provided an opportunity for prisoners "trying to develop a better resume." Jake, the informal "inmate manager" of the prison call center, attested that "I'm learning life skills *and* I'm making money," adding that "you need work like this to keep your sanity [in prison]."

Other perks elevated the status of the call center as well. Being located just across from the complex housing units meant that prisoners could walk to work on their own, rather than rising early to make the bus on time. Unlike many other working prisoners who had to wake as early as 3:30 in order to get dressed, eat, wait for the transport bus, go through security, be stripped down and "checked" at the strip shack upon exit, and travel to their work sites by 5:30, call center workers often woke up after 5:00am and leisurely strolled across the yard to work. At the end of the work day, workers were allowed to head to the chow hall ahead of others. They were handed literal "meal tickets"—narrow slips of paper with their name and station printed on them by a call center staff member. Showing this slip to the COs on chow hall duty secured priority in the meal line over others.

The office space of the call center was narrow and crowded. In the middle of the office sat a window-lined circular station called "the bubble." From this central vantage point, civilian staff members fielded phone calls, file payment information following successful ad sales, and troubleshot phone, computer, pay, or other issues, all while maintaining an open line of sight to the incarcerated workers aligned in cubicles throughout the office. On its windows were scrawled motivating instructions: "*ASK FOR $ EVERY SALE"* and "*STICK TO THE SCRIPT WORD FOR WORD!"* Although most call center workers maintained positive rapport with staff members here, the inside of the bubble remained an off-limits area. If a prisoner needed something from inside, they would first ask permission ("Hey, Eduardo, can I grab some more coffee grounds?"), making sure to keep their feet planted outside of the open entryway.

The owner of the ad firm, Dennis, alternated his work days between the prison call center and an off-site office where he also oversaw a civilian staff. From there, he was also able to monitor the call logs of prisoners, taking note of the time of calls, the location of clients, and the overall frequency of calls. He also maintained access to the feed from a security camera perched above the bubble, overlooking his captive workforce. Participants often referenced that "the boss man is watching," adding an extra layer of digital panopticism to the already heavy security of the prison workplace. One morning, for instance, Dennis called at around 5:45am to chide Eduardo because prisoner salesmen had not yet started making enough calls—many were instead still checking messages. Eduardo shouted to the office, "Hey, get those calls going. Dennis just called about it." One man responded, "Uh-oh, the boss is *watchin'!*" as he put on his headset.

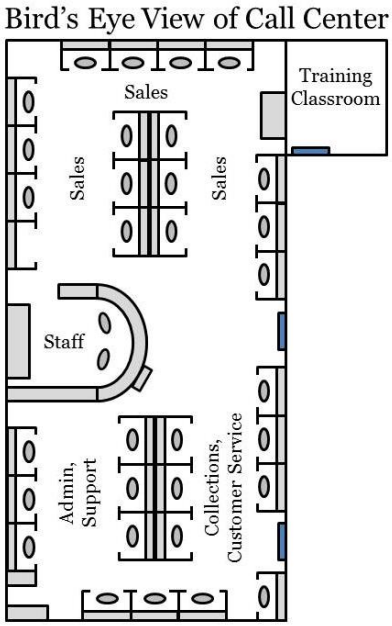

Figure 4. Bird's Eye View of the Call Center

Despite working within a prison, the civilian staffers made efforts to construct an environment that resembled a free world sales office. Posters plastered the walls with motivational slogans. Some presented sales platitudes: "*On every call a sale is made. Either you sell them on yes or they sell you on no. Either way a sale is made."* Others were more inspirational: "*Early to bed, early to rise. Work like hell and advertise!"* Some were facetious: "*Samson killed a thousand men with the jawbone of an ass. That many sales are killed every day with the same weapon."* The basic adage to "*NEVER GIVE UP*" was prominent. In the corner, above the coffee carafe, hung a dry erase board calendar listing each salesman's total (or notable lack of) sales for each day of the current week. Jake frequently referenced the board to motivate his coworkers. In his booming voice he would shout: "Hey, Smith has over $900 *already* today! Way to *go*! Who's gonna catch *up* to

‘im?” Or, “Hoo boy, Smith, this board is lookin’ a little *bare*. What *happened*? You fall *off* this week?”

Each prisoner sat in a cubicle with a phone, a headset, and computer monitor. Some had bottles of water (usually re-used sport drink bottles); virtually all of them had large plastic cups filled with coffee. “Coffee is big here,” said Jake. “The most important thing in sales is maintaining that buzz, you know?” Each phone was connected to a special box allowing calls to be monitored and dialed via the computer system. The computers themselves were limited in their access. They could not access the internet except for the company website and a short list of other approved pages. They had access to an “email server” through which every digital message was filtered for approval by staff. According to Dennis, “In my opinion, they do *not* send emails. What they do is *compose* emails—they enter in the email address of the customer, but when they send it, it goes to my staff.” A staff member reviewed every message for any references to prison or other forbidden details. Every computer keystroke was recorded—“Whether or not they hit enter, everything they type is recorded”—and constant screen captures were logged.

Prisoners were free to adorn the walls of their cubicles “within reason,” typically with a US map, a list of area codes, and a list of different frequent customer phone numbers. Everyone had the sales script posted prominently in their line of sight. Some had small pictures of their romantic partners or children. A few had mirrors beside their computers allowing them to see themselves and perfect the “image” that they wanted to portray through their voices. One prisoner, the young Marshall, decorated his mirror with permanent markers. Across the top he scrawled “HUSTLE HARD MAKE $” in different colors with green dollar signs around the border. On the mirrored glass, he wrote

“$PRINKLE$ ARE FOR WINNER$”—a play on the famous line “coffee is for closers” from the film *Glengarry Glen Ross*, oft-quoted around the office.

Figure 5. Marshall's Mirror Design

Call center workers were loosely divided into two primary segments. The north half of the office was the “sales side,” where half of the work force—around 15 prisoners—made outgoing cold calls pursuing “leads,” dialing the business lines of companies culled from telephone directories. A speaker in the corner played music from an internet radio mix controlled by the civilian staff member in the bubble, streaming a range of genres including 90s R&B, contemporary pop hits, and 70s rock. On the phones, salesmen used fictive “phone names” or aliases. These are “generic sounding” names like Jonathan Brown or George Baker created by one of the civilian staff members by drawing from a list of the 50 most common first and last names in the US. When a salesman quit or was fired, another worker took over their alias until a new hire could fill the gap. One day during fieldwork, I overheard a man answer a call from someone looking for “John Evans.” Covering the mic on his headset and leaning back, he shouted to the room, “Hey, who’s John Evans now?

Who's the *new* John Evans?" Another guy snapped his head around and replied, "Oh, that's me. I'm John Evans now."

Salesmen relied heavily on the carefully prepared sales script on their calls. "Stick to the script, fellas," was a commonly heard from Jake as he strolled past new and veteran salesmen. "The words are proven to work!" Regular training sessions and a thorough training manual provide them with platitudes and sales techniques to employ, such as: "Sell the sizzle, not the steak. The 'sizzle' is the bestselling argument. It's the crunch in the McNuggets, the tang in the cheese, the whiff in the coffee!" The sound of phone chatter on the sales side was constant. Through the overlapping voices, some more powerful than others, a variety of talk with customers could be heard: "Ok, let me ask you this—is this something you want to move forward on today?" "Can I talk to Janine, please?" "Hello, how are you? Good, you *sound* good!" "The ad that you have on the TV is a 30-second *still* ad. What I would like to do is use about 6 to 10 images to create you a new 30-second ad with sound and video." "We thought your company might be a good fit." All of this chatter was punctuated by phones ringing and keyboards clicking, to a Led Zeppelin or Katy Perry soundtrack through the overhead speakers.

When a sale was made, prisoners quickly transferred their calls to the civilian staff member on duty. The rules of the handling of information were strict: any prisoner who attempted to handle credit card or other sensitive customer information—beyond a mere business phone number and name—would be fired and could receive additional punitive sanctions. Violations were rare and prisoners largely self-police. After one successful call, for instance, a salesman called Smith interrupted a customer when she unexpectedly began

to read a credit card number off to him for payment. "Okay, hold on for *one* moment ma'am and I'll connect us with my manager who will take all of that information, okay? Great."

Although there was often some leniency in the "five to survive" monthly quotas, the stress remained palpable near the end of each month on the sales floor. Recent hires were often particularly nervous around this time. During his first weeks on the job, the outspoken Marshall lamented his slow progress and weighed his options:

> This shit is tough. I never sold anything before. Well…I never sold anything over the *phone*. But drugs are easy. They sell themselves. This is harder than robbing banks. That's okay. If this doesn't work out, I can go back to my old job [on the highway crew]. That's a good job. The pay's not as good, but you get out, get to see people.

After making it through his first three months on the job, however, Marshall boasted, "I'm the only one who made it from my 'draft class!'" Grinning, he poured a generous amount of powdered creamer into his coffee. "What's the trick?" I asked. "Just learning on your feet," came his reply. "I look at everything as a competition. I'm trying to be the *best!"*

Connected to the sales floor, the southern half of the office housed the second primary work team, known as the "collections department." The lights were dimmer over this part of the room and chatter was more subdued. A row of imprisoned collectors steadily made calls to follow up with nonpaying customers. They also acted as "CSRs," or customer service representatives, and always sought to "keep the customers happy," even when

payments were overdue. For instance, a collector named Clay, who was somewhat gruff in person, handled his collection calls with great care. I watched and listened one day as he contacted a customer who had failed to pay for a still ad ordered earlier in the year:

> How are you doing today? I'm actually calling today because your file came across my desk for nonpayment. They *wanted* me to send it to a collection agency, but I was hoping to get it taken care of now, so it doesn't have to go to them. We don't want that to happen. … Yes sir, if I can get 99 dollars from your today, I can keep your account from going into the red. … It's two-ninety-nine total. … Okay, let's do that!

He connected the customer to Eduardo in the bubble who would process his first payment. Though their job involved "making sure customers are happy" while also "making sure they pay," collectors were not held to formal quotas like their counterparts in sales. One collector, Ghost, told me that, despite this, "There's *expectations.* You should be getting thirty-five, forty thousand [dollars per month]."

"But it's not as rigid as sales?"

"Nah. *But*, it's harder sometimes. If they [salesmen] have a bad call, they just hang up and move to the next one. We do customer service *and* collections, so if we get a bad call, we're stuck with it. We have to stay on the line with them."

In the corner of the collections department sat a small team of workers with their own unique tasks. These prisoner "admins" addressed technical issues that arose with the display of ads. Javi was the lead admin (he referred to himself and his coworkers as "the nerds"). A college-educated man with advanced computer skills, he maintained contact with locations where ads were displayed and assisted with any issues that arose with the help of his admin coworkers. From the next cubicle, Lang maintained the company's website and updated the software that salesmen used to locate leads and make calls. Beside the admins sat the three-person "art department." They created and edited still and slideshow advertisements. The lead "creative," Emmett, sat in a large desk up against the bubble. Across three computer monitors he edited still images and slideshows using the full Adobe Suite. He worked through lunch many days, preparing a bowl of ramen noodles at his desk, laboring beneath a dim desk lamp, spitting chewing tobacco into a repurposed pepper shaker. Though he was sometimes tapped to create ads from scratch, much of the production process was outsourced to a design firm in India. Prisoners compiled customer names, logos, and other relevant information to forward to Indian designers who typically sent back new work within one day. Riz, the proofreader, then looked over the ads. "I don't know all 72 million words in the English language," Riz would tell me with a grin, "but if something looks weird, I check it out!" After, Emmett made any necessary alterations before the finished ads were sent to the customer for approval. Finalized works were then compiled into sequences for broadcasting.

Sign shop

The other job regarded as the "best" on-complex was the sign shop. Workers here earned up to nearly double the maximum pay of most prison jobs, at $0.50 to $1.00. Despite receiving lower hourly wages than their call center counterparts, the take-home pay of sign shop workers was higher in the absence of forced deductions for room and board or retention funds. Turnover here was low and positions hard to secure. According to one staff overseer, "Most inmates are in here [prison] for five to maybe 12 years before they're able to get [this] job. That's why there's such a line to get in. It's a desirable job." In addition, the work environment around the shop was often said to be more relaxed than elsewhere in the institution. The civilian managers were regarded as "fair" and "consistent" bosses. They typically accorded the prisoners the autonomy to take meals and smoke breaks at their leisure. Unlike in the food factory or other restrictive environments, prisoners were allowed to move about the work site freely. The lack of a constant CO presence contributed to this. As one worker exclaimed with glee: "There's no cops!" Some regarded sign shop work as a daily "vacation from prison," in that it felt like working on the outside of the prison walls. Ben, a long-time worker here, said:

> It's a *real job*. I'm not saying those guys out there [in other prison jobs] aren't working—they're just under the gun. 'Do this! Go there! Don't go there!' Here, it's like a real job. We come in, work our 8 hours. If there's down time, we take it.

There were other perks to sign work as well. The ink, vinyl, and other materials around the shop were occasionally used by artistic prisoners to decorate their belongings

or adorn their work stations. Those working in the inventory and design/layout stations also had access to computers and a copier, with which they could create and disseminate custom signs to hang around the shop or print out the current chow hall menu for everyone.

The sign shop was housed in a large warehouse building with metal siding and high ceilings. Five long rows of lights illuminated the workshop from front to back. Open loading bay doors at either end of the open space let in natural light and fresh air. Teal signs with white, hand-painted lettering demarcate each station: Metal Fabrication, Screen Printing, Packing and Shipping, Vinyl/Layout, and Engraving. Tables, counters, and drying racks crowded all but the middle stretch of the shop. Shelves of screen-printing screens from past orders populated the border between shipping and layout. The smells of ink and vinyl filled the shop. Scattered laughter from mobile groups of workers was often heard beneath the whirs and thuds of the metal fabrication process or the grinding of engraving. Out back was a fenced-in smoking area, complete with a sun shade, a paint-chipped park bench, and a wall-mounted cigarette lighter. Incarcerated workers were often found here smoking or taking a breather between jobs.

Three civilian staff members—employees of the state—oversaw this work site. From his central office, Mr. Edwards, the shop manager, often sat grimly hunched over his desk. He was the "big boss." On some days he strolled through the shop, overseeing production. More often he came out for smoke breaks and returned to his work at his desk shortly after. Despite his sometimes-gruff demeanor, a shared respect was apparent between him and his prisoner employees. According to Rollins, "I been working for Mr. Edwards for over 3 and a half years now. He's the best boss you could ask for—inside *or* out." LD praised his treatment of workers: "Mr. Edwards is a perfect fit for this

environment. He'll drop the F-bomb sometimes," he said with a chuckle. Getting serious once more, he continued, "He'll treat us like *people*, not like inmates." In turn, Edwards maintained earnest esteem for his workers, saying: "I probably get more respect from these people working here than I got from my own employees when I owned my own business."

Second to Edwards was Dempsey, a former CO, who now worked as a civilian security officer under Edwards. He maintained the tool cage where prisoners checked out various tools for use in the sign production process. Finally, Mr. Gale was a graphic designer with his own small office. He often split his time between the computer and the shop floor.

The entire sign-making process began in "Metal Fabrication." In the far corner of the shop sat a caged-in, hulking machine: the "sign cutter," used to stamp out blank metal to the necessary dimensions for various street signs. Chicano prisoners Ocho, Charro, and Scotty were in charge of this area. When new orders arrived, Dempsey brought it first to these men, who measured and cut the appropriate number of metal sheets to the proper dimensions. Next, they rounded the edges using a high-powered shearing machine. Then, each cut sheet was thoroughly sanded down using electric sanders before being buffed. Finally, for things such as speed limit or stop signs, a reflective white vinyl layer is applied to the top of the sign. From here, the prepared metal sheets were carted over to either the screen printing or the vinyl station.

Newcomers to the sign shop typically started in the screen-printing station. Here, they learned to pull high quality ink over mesh screens to apply text and imagery to street signs of all sorts, ranging from basic traffic signs to multi-colored, detailed city emblems. In this and every station, the workers largely trained one another, with little to no staff input

into the production process. Certain prisoners had high status around the shop. Alberto, referred to as the "foreman" by his incarcerated coworkers as well as the civilian bosses, took the lead in training newcomers and delegating tasks when new jobs comes through. Eli, with the most screen-printing experience, and Jon, eager to develop and demonstrate his skills, often took charge on large orders—sometimes printing hundreds of copies of the same sign. Much like in the fleet auto garage, prisoners in this station did not learn conventional techniques, which rely heavily on computer programming. "See, this li'l shit we doin' wit' the *ink*?" a worker called DS asked me rhetorically one day. "It's obsolete. It's all *computers* now!"

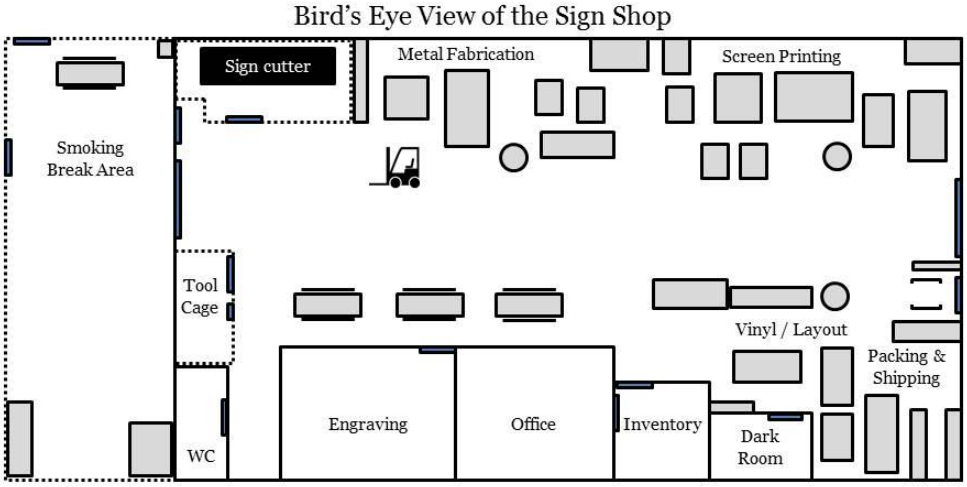

Figure 6. Bird's Eye View of the Sign Shop

In the vinyl station, prisoners did in fact learn to design signage digitally. Slim sat at his "layout computer" at a low desk and prepared designs to be printed out using a massive vinyl printer. (Emmett, now the lead "creative" in the call center, once sat here as well.) After they were printed, these large vinyl sheets—like giant, sturdy stickers with industrial-strength adhesive on one side—were then "weeded." Vinyl station workers

leaned over a tall work table wielding x-acto knives, with which they deftly plucked up excess vinyl from negative space around and within the design, such as the tiny spaces between letters like "e" or numbers like "8." The weeded vinyl is then covered with a large sheet of special tape, which is pulled up to reveal the exposed adhesive. This is then sprayed with a soapy solution—to render it temporarily non-sticky—and then reapplied to sheets of metal cut to the proper dimensions of the sign. With hard plastic scrapers called "hard cards," the men drag the soapy water and bubbles outwards and the vinyl adheres to the metal. As the bubbles escape the vinyl sheet, they emit audible bursts of air, which the men referred to as "vinyl farts." The final product was covered in a sheet of clear, protective coating, called "graffiti coating," which made them easier to clean in the event of vandalism.

Across the shop was the inventory office, also called the administration room. This was a small rectangular office connected to the staff office. Here, prisoner "admins" sitting at a row of computers maintained a full shop inventory. They were prized for their computer skills. As Edwards told me, he could not afford to lose them:

> I have to take care with the inmates who can work as admins. They work on the computers on a system—the system that all of [this] runs on, which has *no* training materials. So, they're very difficult to train. I can't afford to lose them, so I have to make sure they aren't getting in trouble. They're smart—smart enough to get themselves in a lot of trouble.

These workers were able to control the music in their small office—often opting for classical music. They also have access to their own coffee machine and comfortable desk chairs. These men operated in a secluded, calm workspace, apart from the rest of the workers save for during smoke breaks.

In the northwest corner stood a self-contained engraving shop. Inside, four men worked on different tasks all related to the production of engraved plaques and signs. A Latino prisoner with gray hair and glasses, Gris, was often found mounting freshly engraved metal to the wooden base on a new plaque. These were mainly awards or commendations for employees of criminal justice institutions. Luther specialized in name plates, operating a small machine which carved out names and room numbers for labelling office doors or desks. In the corner, Rhodes and Felix sat at computers designing images for fresh orders. Each labored at their own pace on their own tasks. To some, the work in the engraving shop was contentious. Luther told me, "Out there [in the shop] you make all kinds of things, but in here you only make plaques for officers, judges—all the people who put us away, basically." Gris chimed in: "It's kind of ironic really, convicts making awards for officers and judges. There's one guy who won't work in here [engraving] actually. Because he won't make plaques for officers. He refuses. He'll only work out there." After, I stepped outside of the engraving station and saw Lemmy walk by on his way to the vinyl station following a smoke break. He looked down on an array of newly-engraved commendation plaques for six different judges. With an agitated grumble, he blurted out, "*Fuck* all the 'honorable,' 'judicious' buncha—they can all suck my—." He trailed off and let out a quick laugh followed by a groan and walked away.

Finally, every sign and plaque that the workers produced was processed through the shipping station at the front of the shop. Two prisoners, Maurice and Jose, oversaw packaging, labeling, and shipment. Packaged products were bundled in a large metal bin, awaiting a mail delivery truck that arrived twice weekly. Despite the seemingly-simple nature of their charge, Maurice would inform me that "In this department, we have to know *every* [station]. Cause we gotta know what we're shipping and what it's supposed to *look* like. You see?"

Discussion: Structure, Stratification, & Sorting

The typical image of penal labor held by many—that the work of prisoners is monolithic, that it is utterly rigid and despotically managed, that it is unrecognizable from the realities of work in the free world—is not entirely borne out in the contemporary prison. To be sure, imprisoned workers are confined to environments of heavy surveillance and limited rights. Nevertheless, the world of prison work is, from the point of view of prisoners, stratified. Whereas jobs like highway cleanup or the chow line may closely resemble the public imaginary, others, like the call center or heavy equipment operators, are perhaps less expected. Yet, diverse work offerings are indeed the norm within the nation's prisons. The incarcerated, like the free, face a varied labor market and rely on shared criteria in evaluating the work available to them. And, once more reflecting the outside world, these sites may entail divergent advantages or struggles for workers.

It would be insufficient, however, to conclude this story here, with the revelation that there are "good prison jobs" and "bad prison jobs," and that the former promise benefits that the latter cannot. Having documented these realities, new questions emerge. How do pay and resource disparities across the prison labor hierarchy affect prisoners' lives and wellbeing behind bars? How do the varied environments of different sites—such as the dramatic dissimilarities between the day-to-day realities of the food factory and the call center—shape prisoners' practices, strategies, and outlooks? These questions will be addressed in the second half of this dissertation. However, before we can turn to the outcomes of penal labor structures, we must first address another question: Amidst a heterogenous and competitive system of labor behind bars, how are these jobs actually assigned and which individuals or groups are privileged in the pursuit of desirable, rewarding prison work?

Building on the present chapter's documentation of the expansive prison employment system, the following chapter investigates this question by examining the *sorting processes* through which Sunbelt State Penitentiary sorts and sieves its wards into different work crews across the facility. I will interrogate the formal and informal processes through which penal laborers were assigned to coveted "top-tier" work sites like the sign shop and call center, enlisted to labor in "middle-tier" sites like the fleet auto garage, or relegated to objectionable "bottom-tier" sites like the food factory. Zooming in to the internal workings of these four labor sites, I also explore how workers were sorted into different work stations or tasks on the shop floor. Those possessing valued combinations of capitals—i.e., work skills, social ties, tacit knowledge, and other "resources that provide different forms of power" (Sallaz and Zavisca 2007: 23)—were privileged in this system.

Furthermore, racial and ethnic minorities and foreign nationals face additional hurdles in the prison labor market, revealing the continuation of patterns of social inequality and ethnoracial dominance observable in the free world.

CHAPTER 2

Capitals & Punishment:

The Sorting of Working Prisoners

> Unskilled laborers were chosen for this work, that is, not craftsmen or men versed in any trade. … People came home in the evening tired, worn out, and reproached the others all summer with the fact that they were doing the hardest work. That, it seems, was their consolation.
>
> – Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from a Dead House*

The prison in the contemporary United States is considered "a major stratifying institution" (Wakefield and Uggen 2010: 388)—an "engine of social inequality" and a "significant feature on the new landscape of American poverty and race relations" (Western 2006: 198). For racial and ethnic minorities, the undereducated, and the poor, imprisonment looms as a distinct possibility throughout the life course (Garland 2001a; Pettit and Western 2004). Such communities are disproportionately policed, surveilled, and imprisoned (Pettit and Western 2004; Wheelock and Uggen 2008); upon release, their members face heightened discrimination and worsened labor market prospects (Freeman 2008; Pager 2007; Western and Beckett 1999). Consequently, through the containment of disadvantaged minorities rejected by the formal wage-labor market (and the subsequent deterioration of future access to work in the formal sector), the prison serves to reinforce an ethnoracial economic and labor hierarchy (Wacquant 2000).

Yet, despite rich empirical research investigating pre- and post-prison inequalities, less is known in regard to the role of structures, practice, and experiences *within* penal institutions as they contribute to disparities. Indeed, an enduring question in sociology and criminology remains: *How* does contact with the prison shape inequalities along racial, ethnic, and class lines? That is, through what processes are patterns of stratification reproduced and maintained within the contemporary U.S. prison? How do structures and practices behind bars contribute to the durability of ethnoracial labor hierarchies that are observed in the outside world? And, given the differences between top- and bottom-tier penal labor assignments at SSP as described in the previous chapter: How are "good" and "bad" prison jobs assigned and who or what is privileged in this process?

Having observed multiple stages in how penal labor is performed, organized, and supervised over an extended period, I argue that a series of formal and informal *sorting mechanisms* actively maintain inequities between imprisoned groups. This chapter illustrates on-the-ground systems and processes which privilege prisoners already possessing marketable skills and capitals while limiting the opportunities of the un-endowed in the allocation of competitive, higher paying, skilled labor assignments. Though disappearing in today's penal institutions (e.g., Lynch 2010), such desirable work opportunities have been cited as a means of addressing apparent deficits in prisoner skills, resources, or outlooks, with potentially positive implications for reentry (Seiter and Kadela 2003; Maruna 2001; Sampson and Laub 1995; Travis and Visher 2005). Given that the unskilled and undereducated are more likely to be imprisoned (Arum and LaFree 2008; Edin et al. 2008; Hirschfield 2008; Pettit and Western 2004; Western et al. 2001), such

imbalance in opportunities for skill and capital development while behind bars may mirror and aggravate broader systems of stratification.

These data reveal that prior work skills, labor market knowledge and education, social ties, and demographic features such as nationality, race, and ethnicity are each influential in hiring decisions. That is, it is by this logic that the institution sorts and sieves them. As a result, particular prisoner groups—often sorted along the lines of class, race, and nationality—are privileged in the pursuit of desirable prison jobs and have greater mobility between stations within such work sites. Prisoner work and task assignments at SSP are ostensibly made on the basis of race-neutral skill or resource requirements, obscuring biases along racial and ethnic lines. Furthermore, prisoner racial politics (e.g., Skarbek 2014) are at times allowed to influence the work assignment process directly, resulting in even more explicit preservation of racial and ethnic barriers. Such disparities persist in spite of formal policies designed to limit discrimination. Beyond operating as a containment site for populations deemed dangerous and undesirable (e.g., Wacquant 2000), the prison is home to internal procedures and practices that contribute to the maintenance of a racialized labor and economic order.

In the end, it is often those prisoners already advantaged in formal labor markets in the free world who are privileged in the prison employment system, while those at a deficit in outside markets face notable hurdles to success on the inside. The socially reproductive nature of this institution affects the nation's most disadvantaged communities during incarceration (see Wakefield and Uggen 2010). In this sense, this research moves beyond examining divides separating elites and the masses. Social barriers are here reproduced not

between the poor and rich or the incarcerated and free, but within the narrower range of social class occupied by the prisoner population.

Taking Bourdieu to Prison

The insights of Pierre Bourdieu are useful in understanding the implications of how work—and hiring practices—behind bars are structured and, more importantly, the ways in which certain prisoner groups might benefit or be excluded from access to particular prison experiences. Bourdieu's (1996) notion of the "bureaucratic field," for instance, has been deployed in the examination of the emergence of the carceral state in the neoliberal era (Wacquant 2010). Page (2011) draws on a Bourdieusian framework to sketch the broader "penal field," in which agents wrestle over bureaucratic, political, and legal resources and influence (see also Goodman, Page, and Phelps 2017). The prison's functions have similarly been unpacked in terms of a "field of power"—the social space in which positions of power are situated (Bourdieu 1996, 2005)—with penal policy interpreted as a facet of the state's monopolization of not only physical but symbolic violence in this field (Wacquant 2016). And, in this context, the concept of "doxa"—the process through which "the natural and social world appears as self-evident" (Bourdieu 1977)—has been drawn on to illuminate patterns of broader societal acceptance of punitive ideals as natural and valid (Schlosser 2013). In this chapter, I extend from these macro applications of Bourdieusian thought to examine more meso-level structures and practices within the

modern prison. Namely, I explore the role of the internal penological structures in shaping and reproducing the social order.

In his analysis of another powerful institution, the field of elite schools, Bourdieu (1996) reveals that such organizations often rely on recruitment procedures which filter applicants, such that only those "already endowed, through their background, with the dispositions they require" secure admission and accompanying social benefits (73). The prison similarly filters its wards via classification processes underlying mandated labor assignments. Extending from Bourdieu's (1996) work on social boundaries, I identify five key *sorting mechanisms* upon which institutional actors rely in allocating desirable (and undesirable) labor assignments. At different stages in the work allocation process, prisoners may be sorted in terms of the *capitals* they possess, i.e., their available "resources that provide different forms of power" (Sallaz and Zavisca 2007:23). This includes (1) their marketable work skills (often referred to as "human capital," but here regarded as one form of "cultural capital"), (2) their embodied knowledge pertinent to navigating job markets and job interviews along accepted norms (another key form of "cultural capital"), (3) their "social capital," or valuable ties to influential prisoners or staffers, (4) their nationality, and (5) their race or ethnicity and adherence to informal systems of "racial politics" within the institution (Goodman 2014; Skarbek 2014).

By relying on these criteria to sort prisoners, the carceral institution, like the school, acts as a *sieve*, ranking and classifying social actors (see Stevens et al. 2008). Yet, beyond identifying processes of social reproduction at this opposite pole of social class, these data also reveal ways in which already disadvantaged individuals are further limited in terms of

social mobility. The result is a stratified prison employment system that classifies incarcerated workers along the lines of class, race, and ethnicity.

Prison, Labor, & Ethnoracial Order

According to Wacquant (2009), the contemporary prison is central to the creation and preservation of ethnoracial hierarchy in the United States. By serving to "warehouse the precarious and deproletarianized factions of the black working class," it contains a population deemed deviant and dangerous, and actively reinforces caste divisions (Wacquant 2000: 385). As such, today's prisoners are disproportionately "drawn from the lowest rungs in society" (Western and Pettit 2010: 8), resulting in facilities which overwhelmingly "house the jobless, the poor, the racial minority, and the uneducated, not the merely criminal" (Wakefield and Uggen 2010: 393).[14] Accordingly, today's prison acts as a labor market institution, containing full swathes of racial and ethnic minorities of working age and shaping employment through their removal (Sutton 2002; Western and Beckett 1999).

Penal labor is ubiquitous in the nation's prisons, yet the day-to-day realities and implications of this institution remain understudied, particularly regarding its role "as a modern system of racialized and gendered labor governance" (Hatton Forthcoming: 4). The work of prisoners has grown increasingly central to both penal policy and carceral experiences in recent decades (Hatton 2017). In response to slimming budgets and shifting political agendas, prisoner work has been increasingly leveraged to financially support—

or at least mitigate the expenses of—overcrowded, economically strained facilities (Gottschalk 2010; Wacquant 2009). Understanding how justice system inequalities are maintained at the institutional or organizational level requires more closely examining prison labor's role in social reproduction on the ground.

Labor organization as an arena of inequality

Relying on post-release surveys and interviews, some studies suggest that participation in skilled, vocational work programming behind bars may have positive effects on desistance and job market prospects following incarceration (Gaes et al. 1999; Seiter and Kadela 2003; Travis and Vischer 2005). In addition to ostensibly enabling imprisoned workers to better hone relevant skills and earn greater pay behind bars, such work experiences may help bolster prisoners' perceptions of self-worth and the development of positive narratives about their lives (Maruna 2001; particularly chapter 6). Yet, opportunities to acquire skilled or vocational prison work experiences are vanishing at a rapid rate following budget crises (Gottschalk 2010; Lynch 2010; Porter 2011). Instead, most prisoners today engage in unskilled facility support positions like grounds maintenance or food service, or in public works projects like roadway trash collection (Stephan 2008).

As the incarcerated compete for the few skilled and otherwise desirable jobs, administrators and ground-level correctional staff take on quasi-managerial roles—assessing working prisoners and sorting them based on a variety of criteria (e.g., Wakefield and Uggen 2010). One metric by which workers the world over are evaluated and ranked

is in terms of their marketable skills and resources. That is, managers asses workers' forms of *capital*, particularly cultural and social capital. The imprisoned are often ill-equipped along these lines, yet carceral facilities may nevertheless draw on such criteria in assessing them. As Wakefield and Uggen (2010) note:

> The correctional system classifies and sorts its clients just as schools, hospitals, and other social institutions classify and sort their clients. Although many incarcerated men and women have experienced some degree of conventional or criminal success, prisons tend to house those with the least human capital, financial capital, and social capital. (393).

Research in work and organizations can provide insights into evaluative and exclusionary processes at work behind bars. For instance, scholars of work in the free world have outlined how racial or gender prejudices at times supersede merit in hiring decisions (e.g., Castilla 2008). These biases may be deeply embedded in organizations, such as when it is presumed that minorities or women are best suited for certain positions or tasks; yet, such perceptions may be hidden beneath discourses which regard work and workers in abstract, generalized terms (Acker 1990). Discrimination may also be masked by the manner in which different forms of capital are accumulated or valuated. For example, white males may be more successful in accumulating social capital—that is, building ties with instrumental others such as managers or teachers—in organizations overseen by other white males (Royster 2003). Even when institutions are deliberately designed to operate

meritocratically, patterns of racial segregation may nevertheless persist and help to "create and maintain racially segregated (nonoverlapping) networks among whites and blacks," resulting in imbalances in access to vital opportunities and resources (Royster 2003: 113). When lower-status workers do manage to overcome hurdles to desirable work, they may still be consigned to less respectable stations or tasks, generating within-job inequality (Chan and Anteby 2016; Reskin and Roos 1990).

In these ways, inequality is maintained not only through macro processes, but via meso- and micro-level organizational structures and practice (Reskin 2000). In the penological context, gendered and racialized job segregation has been reported in how tasks are assigned amongst correctional officers (Britton 2003), and historically amongst female prisoners (Grana 2010; Haley 2016). Further, recent survey research reveals relationships between prisoners' race and gender and the type of work they engage in behind bars (Crittenden et al. 2018). White men are disproportionately more likely to be assigned to skilled, vocational labor assignments than their minority and female counterparts, according to this work. However, the mechanisms by which this comes to be require further examination. Complementing this research, the remainder of this chapter investigates the mechanisms underlying such relationships on the ground level.

Access to Prison Programming

Research on the expansion of the U.S. prison system over recent decades has contended that American prisons have taken a "punitive turn," abandoning missions of rehabilitation

(Western and Pettit 2010) or "braiding" punitive and rehabilitative features (Hutchinson 2006). In spite of empirical evidence of rising punitiveness, however, policymakers and prison administrators persist in espousing the rehabilitative capacity of the prison and of penal labor in particular (as discussed in the Introduction). Such assertions rest on the assumption that work programs behind bars in fact offer opportunities for skill training as well as work environments conducive to the development of positive outlooks and "work ethics." Though these are vanishing at a rapid rate (Lynch 2010), some potentially-rehabilitative work experiences (by this definition) yet remain in many penal facilities. Whether or not they are accessible by all prisoners, however, remains unexplored.

The fact that "good prison jobs" were difficult to acquire—and not always equitably assigned—was a point of common knowledge within SSP. Some accepted this reality as an unfortunate but inevitable facet of punishment: "I'm used to getting jacked around by the system," as one prisoner put it. For others, this perceived injustice contributed to frustrations: according to another man, "It's bullshit and they will work the hell out of you [in bad jobs]." In a conversation during work one day with Lemmy, a gray-mustachioed, white prisoner employed in the prison sign shop, he muttered:

LEMMY:	The state doesn't rehabilitate, it [just] incarcerates.
RESEARCHER:	What about jobs like this [the sign shop]?

LEMMY: Sure, but they're hard to get. I've been down [incarcerated] eleven years and I finally *just* got one.

Like many others, Lemmy had desired a top-tier job for its higher pay, greater autonomy, and other attractive features. Yet, he had failed to acquire one until he was able to develop and mobilize beneficial resources. And, once employed, these facilitated a quick transition from an entry level station to a more desirable job designing signs digitally. Having worked as a skilled craftsman for decades, he already possessed some skills necessary for the productive labors of the shop. Beyond that, he added, "To be honest, it's—a lot of it's who you know. Getting hired on, I knew somebody. And moving within the [work site], I knew somebody. And they pulled me along."

For every man like Lemmy on the inside, there remained many others less capable or fortunate—men who did not possess the skills or resources that might help them navigate the prison employment system. This observation informs two core questions: Who gets good prison jobs and why? And which skills, resources, or characteristics are privileged in this process? Findings revealed that institutional decision-making processes privileged those already possessing relevant, marketable work skills and valued forms of cultural and social capital. The ability to accumulate and deploy such resources, however, was often contingent on race, ethnicity, and nationality.

The formal job assignment process

Officially, the job application and assignment process at SSP was straightforward. A prisoner had simply to fill out an application indicating their preferences and qualifications and wait for an opening in their work site of choice. In the meantime, they may be assigned to other available work programs as they await an opening in their desired position. In practice, however, this process rarely if ever played out as described. First, acquiring a 1-page paper application for work was often easier said than done. As one young prisoner told me with a shrug, "You really gotta ask around to get an app. *Some* [housing] bays have CO clerks who might [have blank copies]." To be sure, my own search for an application around the yard and work sites took nearly two months. Those who did not—or could not—submit an application indicating specific preferences were often automatically sent to the food factory or other unpopular facility support jobs. "There's *always* somebody else to shoot in" to the food factory, said CO Byrne. According to one working prisoner, Jake, "Once you're in their little system, they'll keep assigning you—to the food factory or wherever." By limiting access to applications, the prison helped ensure a steadier supply of labor for such vital but vilified work sites.

Once an application was submitted, a prisoner could expect to be called in to meet with a correctional officer whom I refer to as the Work Program Assignment Officer (WPAO). The WPAO's primary task was to assign men to work or education programs. "We have about three-fourths doing *something*, either working or in classes," she told me. "That's the best, I think. Just keeping them all busy." Most of the remaining, unassigned prisoners were those who had been deemed physically or psychologically unfit for work, or who had been marked "ineligible" for many programs after being labelled a "flight risk" (i.e., likely to attempt escape) or raising other security concerns.

Even if a prisoner did manage to get assigned to the work program of their choosing, the most desirable programs relied on additional steps to vet applicants. Being accepted into the prison sign shop, for instance, required completing a short educational assessment. The on-site manager of the sign shop, Mr. Edwards, described this as a way to narrow down the applicant pool by assessing knowledge of "basic middle school things—shapes, colors, et cetera. Things that you and I could do with ease." Men achieving an adequate score on the test were then interviewed by Edwards regarding past work history, skills, and general outlooks regarding work and workplace dynamics. Similarly, those applying to the call center had to pass a brief computer test—demonstrating their ability to log in to a computer and dial a call using the automated system—"because most of what is done here takes place on a computer." Upon successfully completing this, applicants had to follow a provided sales script to complete a "mock sales call" to the call center manager, Dennis. When I asked one recent hire about the experience, he exclaimed: "It was scary. *Real* scary. Like, I started sweating within 20 seconds. I was dripping sweat!"

After being assigned, transferring between work programs was often difficult. According to Dempsey, a civilian staff member overseeing the sign shop: "Guys put in requests to move all the time, but they almost *never* go through." Hence, prisoners in many sites—especially those employed in the bottom tier of the employment hierarchy—often expressed feeling "trapped" in their work assignments.

As per official policy, SSP adhered to what officers referred to as "racial balancing." This policy dictated that work and education programs should reflect the demographic characteristics of the prison unit when possible. In other words, they should

seek to proportionately represent each of the primary racial cliques in the prison at each site.[15] As one high-ranking correctional officer was quick to assert:

> Work isn't segregated. The work crews are *racially balanced*. So, if the yard is, say, X-percent black, a certain percent Mexican, certain percent white, we'll pull from those applications and say 'Okay, let's hire that percentage blacks, Latinos—like, either one paisa [foreign national] and one Mexican-American, or 2 Mexican-Americans—whites, et cetera.

Prison decision-makers attempted to adhere to this policy when filling vacant positions. While the racial/ethnic demographics of each site rarely directly mirrored the general population, racial balancing remained a feature of the work assignment process. Still, exceptions to this policy were openly made for certain programs. For instance, the call center was exempted, according to the WPAO, because its hiring decisions were made solely based on completion of the computer test and the mock sales call. As will be discussed below, racial imbalances were apparent in how call center hiring played out. Other skilled positions were less balanced for similar reasons—the WPAO tended to allow overseers of skilled sites to select or vet their own laborers.

Exceptions were also made for work in which particular groups refused to participate. For instance, white prisoners rejected assignments to work as shoe shines on the grounds that such a job entails direct subservience to staff members. Prison

administrators allowed this in order to limit conflict with the "heads" of the racial cliques (Skarbek [2014] details how prison racial politics may shape administrative practice).

Refer to Table 1 (page 39), which depicts approximate racial/ethnic demographics of the work programs emphasized in this study. Note that certain sites, here represented by the call center and fleet garage, exhibited obvious patterns of imbalanced hiring of white prisoners, confirming the findings of Crittenden, Koons-Witt, and Kaminski (2018) that skilled penal labor assignments are inequitably awarded along racial lines. Other SSP work sites like the sign shop and food factory, however, demonstrated less-clear-cut displays of hiring discrimination. Yet, at these sites, other forms of inequity along racial/ethnic lines became apparent following observations. They were home to observable forms of station or task discrimination *within* the workplace, as will be detailed below.

Capital & Skill in Prison Job Allocation

At Sunbelt State Penitentiary, prisoner work assignments were commonly secured by those already possessing marketable capabilities or valuable resources. This section will detail the role of work skills, cultural capital, and social capital to this end. In many cases, sorting mechanisms that centered on such capitals acted to relegate racial and ethnic minorities to undesirable work sites or to low-status stations within skilled programs.

The role of work skills in getting a prison job

Early in fieldwork, an aging sign shop worker called Eli told me: “Prisons aren’t too particular where they assign you, you see. Unless you have a skill in a certain area.” When I inquired after the process of assigning prisoners to desirable work programs, the WPAO confirmed Eli’s proclamation, stating that “Past work history is big … [especially] for a lot of the skilled positions: automotive, any kind of maintenance, that sort of thing.” Indeed, Eli had possessed some experience in manufacturing and printing, which helped secure him the position. Another man, called Bass, had operated his own small sign shop for 35 years in the free world and considered his time working in the prison shop to be “valuable training” to hone his skills and improve his own business upon release. Another, Clegg, worked for decades alongside his father producing signs prior to incarceration. “I [am] second generation. I mean, yeah, my father was in the sign business,” he told me. “That’s how I got into it, working for my dad.” With a slight smile, he added, “My son’s in the same business too.” Such experiences were often directly mobilized in the job search. According to Clegg, “I've got 25 years in in the sign business, so [Mr. Edwards] hired me from that. So, yeah, that's how I got on [to the crew].”

Many other sign shop workers had not directly “worked signs” before prison, yet nevertheless possessed relevant skills acquired from other production experiences. For example, Samuél, who had worked in metal fabrication during his pre-prison work history, secured a position in the shop’s metal fabricate station. Lemmy, referenced above, was a skilled contractor and possessed many skills analogous to parts of the printing process.

Like the sign shop, the fleet garage, too, was explicit in its practice of privileging applicants with work history in the trade. Noting that most of the crew had prior automotive experience, I asked one of the incarcerated mechanics, “Do you think people who already

have mechanic experience have a better chance of getting a job here?" Without a pause, he snorted and replied, "*Oh yeah*, definitely." I would learn that the managers of the garage—Graham and Boyle—almost exclusively pulled applications from men who had repair and maintenance experience and who were referred by current workers. The CO overseeing the garage, CO Peña, expressed that, though it might benefit unskilled prisoners to be trained from scratch, it was more important that the prison's vehicles were repaired quickly and properly—"And you don't have that many inmates out there who can do a tear-down of a tire or change a transmission." Upon hiring skilled workers, fleet staff watched them closely during a two week "trial period." Boyle would recount that it was sometimes "a roll of the dice" in terms of the experience that prisoners claimed and what they could actually do around the shop. With a shrug, he added, "Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't."

Although transferring from a "bad job" to a "good job" was difficult in prison, there were some exceptions. A man named Jared, for example, managed to move from the food factory to the sign shop during my fieldwork. He did so, I would learn, by leveraging his prior experience. When I commented that he already looked like a "pro" after only a few days on the job, he shared that he actually had years of sign-making experience and had in fact managed to secure his position by mobilizing these skills as well as his ties to workers both within the prison and in sign shops in the free world:

> Clegg handed in my application for me, which helped. I also used to work signs on the outside and I mentioned that. Mr.

> Gale [a civilian staffer in the sign shop] asked who I worked for and I told him my best friend, who owns his own shop. He said 'Oh! I've known [him] for years!' It was mostly those credentials though. I worked signs on the outside.

In general, skilled prison workers were better able to navigate the prison employment system than others. Indeed, on some occasions, they managed to entirely circumvent the formal process. In the call center one day, for instance, I was surprised to see Lester, who worked as an inventory clerk at the sign shop, walk in and sit down at a computer after lunch. He informed me that he left work at the sign shop early so that a friend could teach him the ins and outs of the call center's computer system. Though he hadn't yet been hired at the call center, he was confident that, given his computer skills, he would certainly be brought on. Sure enough, he was added to the roster the following week, foregoing the interview and entrance test. As one of few prisoners with a college degree and verifiable computer literacy, Lester was certainly valued in the carceral labor market. "You have to try to hold on to guys who can do computers," the sign shop manager, Edwards, would tell me, "because they're hard to come by."

In some cases, COs or other staffers overseeing penal work programs actively competed with one another to secure or retain skilled workers. CO Peña of the fleet garage got into a minor spat with another correctional officer one week over the hiring of a talented welder. The prisoner applied to and was hired by the auto garage, only to be put on "hold" at his current job before he could transfer. "We tried to hire a welder from [the grounds crew]," Peña recounted. "As soon as they found out, they said 'Nope!' They cut it off,

trapped him there. [The CO] over there said '*Hell* no!' when he tried to move. 'I need him here—he's my best welder!' That's how it goes."

Staffers justified prioritizing and rewarding skilled workers in different ways. According to some, the unskilled workers wound up in bad jobs because they possessed *other* flaws which informed their lack of marketable skill. As one CO would express, skilled workers were thought to exhibit dedication to learning, whereas the unskilled were unmotivated:

> I think some of these guys, they have more *integrity*. A place like the food factory, that's used as like a punishment. Who wants to wrap sandwiches all day? Or grounds crews—most of those guys don't *want* to work. They hide their rake under their bed and go watch TV all day. You gotta chase 'em down. They say, 'Oh, yeah, I'm sorry, I'll go work now,' then do the same thing tomorrow. Some people just—I hate to say it this way—they just come in here more *ghetto*. They want to go exploit the system, to get over on somebody. But if you come in with no skills except pushing a *rake*, then that's what you *do!* Whereas these [skilled] guys, they grew up working. They like coming here and working.

The imprisoned disproportionately hail from backgrounds of poverty and inopportunity. By the above logic, however, unskilled prisoners—perhaps in the majority (Wakefield and

Uggen, 2010)—are to be blamed for lacking "integrity." Unmistakably, such statements from COs (and some skilled prisoners) were often couched in racialized rhetoric. As the above quote illustrates, those who attempted to resist coercion into deskilled captive labor were regarded as "more ghetto" and hence undeserving of desirable work. This highlights how purportedly colorblind practices of rewarding particular skillsets belied the maintenance of ethnoracial labor hierarchy behind bars.

The role of cultural capital in getting a prison job

Beyond particular work experiences, other forms of embodied knowledge and resources were valued in the prison employment system. Such assets may be understood as forms of "cultural capital," or demonstrable "competence in some socially valued area of practice" (Sallaz and Zavisca 2007: 23). This may be expressed in various forms, including via institutional certifications or via dispositions, preferences, or practices (Bourdieu 1984). This section will focus on three forms of cultural capital in particular. First, I discuss formal limitations along the lines of prisoners' educational attainment and certifications. Second, I outline the influence of embodied labor market knowledge: the know-how to produce a resume and navigate hiring processes in a manner consonant with the norms of the job search in the free world. Third, I illustrate the role of prisoners' expressive or self-presentation capabilities—in particular, the ability to exhibit what might be referred to as "linguistic cultural capital": the (inculcated) ability to communicate using valued dialects, accents, and other symbolic verbal markers of social standing (Bourdieu 1993a; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Linguistic practices in particular are entangled with

processes of racialization in the U.S. (Alim et al. 2016). Forms of speech that fall outside of so-called standard American English reflect perceptions of race and class, often leading to penalties for speech patterns associated with black or Latino culture.

One formal barrier to desirable prison employment for many incarcerated men is their education level. Official departmental orders at SSP mandated that job applicants must possess a high school diploma or GED in order to be eligible for any position in which reading and writing skills were deemed necessary—as a bona fide occupational qualification. These positions included educational tutors, who assisted teachers in the prison classroom; clerks or aides, who often helped prison staffers file paperwork and take notes; and the call center, in which workers had to be able to comprehend written sales pitch scripts and compose messages to potential customers. Less clear-cut, however, were regulations which mandated the same educational requirements for positions like the sign shop or outside highway cleanup crews, where such skills were not as overtly required for most standard, day-to-day work activities. Nevertheless, such requirements existed, leaving a large segment of the prisoner population unable to pursue many work opportunities. Indeed, approximately 70% of incarcerated people in the United States do not possess a high school degree or equivalent (Wakefield and Uggen 2010). For the majority of prisoners, the absence of formal educational certification severely limited their access to desirable work programming.

To be sure, this educational barrier to mobility acted as a motivator for some. For example, while participating in work at the prison food factory one afternoon, I worked alongside two men who had been stationed in the food factory sandwich shop for several months. While we assembled our sandwich materials—meat, bread, cheese, repeat—the

man on the left cast a sideways glance at his coworker, whom he noted was working quicker than usual. With a furrowed brow, he blurted, "Hey, why you rolling sandwiches so *fast!?* You ain't gonna get no special *privileges* rolling fast like that." With a slight shrug, the man on the right timidly replied: "I'm taking my state requirement [GED] test next week. I want to get a good job. If I'm fast *and* I pass that? I dunno—might be good." The man on the left shook his head as if to signal disbelief and disappointment before emitting an exaggerated "*Psssshhh*, whatever."

Beyond formal certification, certain forms of labor market knowledge were valuable in pursuing good prison jobs at SSP. Successful prisoners were often those experienced in the process of applying for jobs, preparing materials like a resume or cover letter, and successfully navigating face-to-face job interviews. This was particularly explicit in the hiring process of the sign shop. For example, before having the opportunity to pass the educational assessment test, competitive applicants for the sign shop were expected to first satisfy the manager's informal hiring expectations. Mr. Edwards revealed his process for narrowing down the applicant pool:

> When guys send me applications that say, 'I'm a good worker and a fast learner,' those go *right* in the trash. Anybody can write that. Anybody can *say* that. What I want is a *resume.* When a guy sends in a resume or a cover letter with 'I've worked *this* job for X amount of years, *this* job for X amount of years'—*those* are the men I will interview. *Those* are the men I will hire.

During the time of my fieldwork, SSP did not offer any programs or classes aimed at training prisoners in drafting resumes or cover letters. This meant that those who had not learned these skills prior to incarceration were likely to be unsuccessful in the sign shop hiring process.

Those who did submit acceptable application materials to Edwards were then required to complete a one-on-one job interview with the man. Here, they were asked to explicate their prior work experience: "When I interview them, I ask them, what jobs have they had on the outside," he told me. Applicants were also expected to demonstrate that they would approach the opportunity "with a dedication to do a job and to do it *well* and not just [have an attitude of], 'I'm here. Pay me.'" Conducting oneself "professionally" in these interviews was a must.

Linguistic capital was highly valued in prison hiring processes. To exhibit linguistic capital, one must demonstrate mastery of communication styles valued by a given institution or by powerful persons within it. Particular dialects, vocabularies, and accents may be deemed "incorrect" or "improper" in many formal settings. Mastering dominant dialects is tied to class upbringing and entangled with processes of racialization. "On the job market, language-based discrimination intersects with issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and national origin to make it more difficult for qualified applicants with an 'accent' to receive equal opportunities" (Alim et al. 2016: 27).

In the penal labor context, linguistic cultural capital was reflected in individuals' ability to recognize and abide by normative speech patterns that were rewarded by administrators and correctional staffers. Demonstrating communicative competence—that

is, successfully recognizing and adhering to the language norms valued in a given context (Hymes 1966)—was particularly important for getting a job in the call center. As in knowledge industry work in the free world, the hiring process here required jobseekers to "speak like white corporate America," as demonstrated in part by the "avoidance of slang (such as Black English)" (Chapple 2006: 559). To assess workers along these lines, the hiring process here involved calling the call center manager, Dennis, over the phone to attempt to sell him advertising time in a "mock sales pitch." On these calls, applicants read from pre-printed sales scripts and responded to questions from Dennis posing as an interested customer. When I asked which qualities he prioritized during the sales call test, Dennis replied that competitive applicants "speak clearly and slowly, come up with logical responses to questions, not stutter, don't sound like they're from the *ghetto*, and have relatively good English." Along these lines, he would add, "one-third fail as soon as they open their mouth."

Paralleling language that CO Peña had used to describe prisoners with limited work histories, Dennis drew on perceptions of race and space in describing the qualities of (un)desirable applicants. The fact that not speaking like one is "from the ghetto" was considered a bona fide occupational qualification highlights the racialized nature of linguistic capital requirements. Because of these expectations, many black and Latino applicants were immediately excluded on account of dialect or accent. I asked other participants why they thought Latinos in particular were underrepresented in the work site. One respondent was Eduardo, a Chicano civilian employee hired by Dennis to help oversee the call center sales floor. After contemplating the question, he replied, "I think it's the *accent*. They [Latinos] just don't do well. Everything today seems like a scam, so when

people hear a Mexican accent, they get worried: 'Oh, some dude in Mexico is scamming me!'" Jake, the imprisoned white salesman tasked with training new hires, drew on racialized perceptions of conversational and personality styles to explain the lack of ethnic diversity: "I been trying to get some *éses* in here for forever. But, I think, traditionally, Mexican guys are more stoic, while us white dudes are more, uh, outgoing, you know? We'll bullshit ya all day. So, they don't have as much success on the phone."

As a result of hiring processes privileging particular styles of self-presentation, the call center—the highest-paying and most sought-after prison job—was largely a white job (see Table 1). By foregrounding hiring criteria that tended to exclude minority candidates, the overseers of this site appeared invested in (or, at best, resigned to) maintaining an ethnoracial labor hierarchy behind bars, circumventing formal policies prohibiting segregation.

The role of social capital in getting a prison job

Knowing the right person was helpful in the prison job search. Those who could be "vouched for" by staff members or by other prisoners working in desirable work sites possessed valuable "social capital": durable ties or networks of relationships individuals may draw on to "get ahead" or acquire resources (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Hsung, Lin, and Breiger 2009). Unlike in the free world, in which casual, indirect, or "weak" social ties may be most fruitful in the job search (Granovetter 1995), in prison, strong personal ties appeared necessary for success. Prison racial politics, however, ensured that social connections remained wrapped up in racial hierarchy. As a result of these interactional

rules, prisoners were limited in their freedom to speak with, touch, eat with, and generally interact with members of other racial cliques for fear of enforcement (e.g., Goodman 2014). Making strong connections with other prisoners across ethnoracial lines could therefore be difficult. Consequently, for some, ties to staffers were invaluable.

Being on good terms with the Work Program Assignment Officer was helpful in avoiding undesirable assignments. One man, called Diamond, proudly told me, "I wouldn't work in the food factory. They'd have to *fire* me! … Actually, I know somebody in the [WPAO office], so I'd never end *up* over there." Noting my interest in his ability to mobilize this tie, he continued, "Prison is *all* about who you know. You know the right person, you'll *never* get stuck in a shitty job." Ties to other staff members were influential as well. According to one man, "COs who see you work will give you more leeway" and may even "help you get out" of disagreeable work assignments, such as working as a porter.

When overseers of prison work programs were reassigned to different sites across the institution, they sometimes brought prized workers along with them. For instance, before managing the prison sign shop, Mr. Edwards oversaw an agricultural work program at Sunbelt State Penitentiary. When the private contract funding that program was discontinued, Edwards was reassigned to the sign shop. Ocho, a Chicano worker stationed in the sign shop's metal fabrication station during my fieldwork, was one of several working prisoners who had worked under Edwards his old position. When the manager was relocated, he promptly hired Ocho at the new site. Of his connection to Edwards, Ocho exclaimed "This is like gold!" Like others, he attested to benefiting from this valuable tie in material and immaterial ways. Being able to secure a good job in prison, he said, "drives

you even more to stay focused and to stay healthy. … And I might get out of here with over about $1550 [in savings] and that's going to help me out just fine."

In spite of departmental regulations formally limiting the input of prisoners into everyday institutional operations, incarcerated men who were already employed in desirable work sites were also often able to influence hiring practices and assist others in securing skilled, higher-paying positions. According to Mr. Gale, a prison staffer working under Edwards in the sign shop, being vouched for by a prisoner already employed in good standing at this site was arguably the only way for new applicants to secure a position there. "We only take guys who *know* each other," he stated. For example, after he had established himself in the shop, Ocho was able to recruit individuals that he knew and trusted from the prison yard. When a position in the metal fabrication station opened up, he recommended Samuél (who was working as a dishwasher in the food factory at the time), who was quickly hired on the basis of this referral as well as his relevant work history.

This manner of hiring was common to the sign shop. Workers actively *recruited* when an opening on the crew emerged. Many recounted keeping a "mental list" of possible referrals for just this occurrence. According to one long-standing prison laborer in the shop, Felix, "When I'm in the yard *recruiting*, I only look for guys who we can *work* with." Recall, too, Jared's acknowledgement that "Clegg handed in my application for me, which helped." The hiring of only those individuals who have been "recruited" by current sign shop workers was justified on the basis that it made the work process smoother. During a conversation about how a new vacancy would be filled, LD, a wide-eyed prisoner working as a sign shop inventory clerk, and Dempsey, a civilian manager supervising the work site, agreed on this point. "It comes through us. With very few exceptions, the guys we hire are

all referred by us," said LD. Dempsey quickly nodded, turned to me, and added, "Yeah. And—we don't want to empower these guys *too* much—but it works."

"If we recommend someone, they're gonna be *on time*," LD went on. "We're gonna make sure of it. Because if they're *not*, if they aren't *reliable*, then we look bad too." Nodding once more, Dempsey confirmed: "That's right." According to LD, not everyone on the yard was deserving of a referral, regardless of their social ties. "We sort of vet people out, make sure they're reliable for a while first." Referred applicants could prove "unreliable," for instance, by being dishonest about disciplinary records. Prisoners that had received excessive disciplinary write-ups—or tickets—could expect their transfer to the sign shop to be halted by the WPAO. According to LD:

> Sometimes a guy might not be forthright with us. He might have more tickets than he said. So, the [WPAO] will shut it down. I've referred *one* person since I've worked here—I made certain first that he was shooting straight with me. I trusted him, plus he was working as a tram driver, so I knew he didn't have any tickets, to work that job.

The value of social capital was not unique to the sign shop. The fleet auto garage also relied on a combination of referrals and work history in making its hiring decisions. Here, too, staff members often circumvented the formal hiring process. "They're [the WPAO] usually good about letting me pick my own people," said Graham, the manager of the garage. For instance, when I first met Seth, he expressed that he felt "stuck" in his job

wrapping sandwiches at the food factory. A few months later, however, he secured a position in fleet following a recommendation from another mechanic, Gael. According to Seth, it was his work ethic that enabled him to finally move up in the prison employment hierarchy. “If you work hard,” he said, “then Byrne [the CO overseeing the food factory] will let you go.” In practice, when a position in fleet became available, Gael told his boss that Seth would be a good fit. The boss called the WPAO and requested that Seth be transferred over. The WPAO then called CO Byrne to initiate the transfer. A short while later, Seth moved into a mechanic position. Once established in his fleet job, he too was in a position to refer people just as Gael had referred him. According to Seth, whenever positions became available, “we'll go back on the yard and find people, and then give [the site managers] their application, and they'll decide if they want to hire them or not. But we'll question them on the yard about what they know [about auto repair], and this and that.”

In the call center, imprisoned workers were instrumental in hiring in a different way. Here, possessing ties to active salesmen gave one a decided advantage in honing and demonstrating the requisite communication skills and succeeding in the “mock sales call” test. When a new position on the sales team opened up, current workers often sought out friends from the yard and gave them a copy of the sales script. Unlike unconnected applicants, who only received the script minutes before they were expected to follow it on the phone, these well-connected individuals could benefit from days or even weeks of advance notice and time to memorize and perfect the pitch. Jake, an incarcerated salesman who oversaw the training of new hires, kept a stack of printouts of the script on hand to give to his contacts whenever a new round of hiring was set to commence. One person who

benefited from his connection to Jake was Marino, a tattooed man with what he called a "back East" accent. Having received the script weeks before his interview date—and doing practice runs of the sales call with friends from the call center who "helped him keep at it"—he had little trouble succeeding in the interview. Months later, I would watch him extend the same assistance to others on the yard. Outside during a smoke break one day, a man approached Marino and expressed anxiety at the progress of his "practice." With a reassuring tone, Marino told the man, "Hey, just keep at it. Whenever a commercial comes on [TV], take a break and study it. We'll go over it when I get off. Alright?" After the man left, he flicked his cigarette and told me, "He's studying the script. I'm trying to get him a job here."

For those employed in the most desirable work sites, the ability to grant or deny a referral operated as a form of power in the prison. In this way, some maintained notable influence over work programming at SSP. In such an environment, where racial politics often dictated the rules of interactions—and limited with whom one could develop strong social ties—social capital was intertwined with racial, ethnic, and national divides. Ethnoracial hierarchies were created and implicitly maintained in the prison via processes rewarding strong connections. Prisoners in prized positions typically referred or assisted others from the same racial/ethnic group. Often, white prisoners like Jake held more influential positions in work sites, an arrangement that indirectly reified racial barriers to desirable jobs or stations. The next section will turn toward more overt patterns of discrimination in penal labor sorting mechanisms, which were evident at both ends of the hierarchy of prison jobs.

Race, Ethnicity, & Nationality in Prison Job Allocation

Like many U.S. prisons, Sunbelt State Penitentiary formally prohibited the use of race, ethnicity, nationality and other demographic features in disproportionately assigning work duty to prisoners of different groups. The prison's attempt to "racially balance" work sites represented an on-the-ground realization of this prohibition. Nevertheless, such characteristics openly shaped the opportunities available to many. This was apparent in how prisoners were sorted into work sites as well as into workplace tasks.

The role of race, ethnicity, & nationality in getting a prison job

In order to keep track of each individual prisoner's current program assignment, the WPAO relied on a massive magnetic "program board." This board, which covered an entire wall of her office, contained a grid representing each respective work and education program. Each program's respective space on the board was populated by a set of small rectangular magnets bearing individual prisoners' names, DOC numbers, and photos. To keep up with the prison's policy of "race balancing" each program, the hundreds of magnetic prisoner photos were outlined with color-coded borders corresponding to the racial or national group that individual prisoners self-reported upon entry to the prison. White prisoners had a white border; black prisoners had a blue border; Chicano prisoners had a pink border; foreign nationals had a purple border; Native Americans had a green border. All other prisoners—regarded as "others" by staff and prisoners alike—received a

yellow border. “Those are mostly Asians,” the WPAO stated. With a glance at this board, she could quickly ascertain the racial/ethnic makeup of each work site. When necessary, this knowledge was used to determine which prisoner to approve for assignment or transfer to a given site along the lines of self-reported demographics.

Certain exceptions were sometimes made to the policy of “race balancing” work sites. In select instances, the leaders of the hierarchical racial cliques in the prison—referred to as the “heads of the different races”—dictated to members of their own racial groups that they were not allowed to accept assignment into particular programs. Often, prison administrators allowed these self-imposed restrictions to stand, thereby letting racial politics influence formal procedure (see Skarbek 2004). Work programs commonly rejected by specific racial groups included those entailing directly “serving” staff members in a deferential capacity, repairing or otherwise supporting carceral architecture, or frequently interacting one-on-one with staffers. For instance, I learned early that white prisoners at SSP had been instructed not to work as shoe shines. When I encountered a white prisoner lounging near the shoe shine chair one morning, I asked if he worked at that station. He responded with shock. “White guys aren’t allowed to be shoe shines. That’s what the heads on the yard decided,” he informed me. “Any other races can, though?” I asked. “Yeah,” came his curt reply.

Later, I mentioned the interaction to Seth and Gael at the fleet auto garage—who identified as white and Chicano, respectively. In addition to whites refusing to work as shoe shines, they would inform me that several racial groups refused to work positions like staff barber, fence repair crew, and lock welding crew. In several instances, differences emerged along national rather than racial lines:

SETH: White boys won't do shoe shine 'cause it's degrading to polish up an officer's boots. And the fence crew—we're not gonna build up the walls and fences and the razor wire that keeps us in. The white boys and the blacks and the, uh, Chicano Mexicans—the Mexican-Americans—we won't do it. Only the paisas—the Mexican nationals—will do it 'cause they don't give a fuck. They do their own thing.

GAEL: Yeah, like the welders—they [whites, blacks, and Chicanos] won't weld locks, you know, to lock us in. They refuse. But the Mexican nationals don't give a fuck what anybody else does. It's basically the Americans who won't do it, pretty much.

I followed up by asking how repairing staff members' vehicles differed from these other jobs since each served the institution. Seth replied, "Yeah, I see what you're sayin'. Because we're fixin' *their* vehicles." After pausing to think about it for a moment, he continued:

SETH: But these [vehicles] are also used to transport *us* around. When we fix 'em, we can make sure *our people* are safe, you know? Anything to do with security—fences, razor wire, locks—we don't fix that because that's what's keeping us locked in. Why would a man build his own *prison?* But here, a bus taking a load of 50 guys statewide? We can make sure they're gonna be safe. I dunno, that's how I think of it.

When a prisoner opted to go against the directives of the racial hierarchy and request a position that they had been instructed to avoid, the "head" of their racial clique on the yard often intervened. "They might get a quick *talking to*," said CO Peña, raising his eyebrows and miming air quotes as if to signal that such interventions could be more severe than just harsh words. Because of this, "they typically quit [those jobs] after a month, tops," he suggested. To explain why paisas were willing to work in sites like the fence or locks crews when other groups refused, Peña surmised that "it's because they're not from this country… They don't have to follow the heads' rules as much because their leadership isn't based in the U.S."

Formal prison regulations limited job applicants along the lines of nationality as well. Foreign nationals at SSP were barred from applying to certain work sites. In particular, the two "best" prison jobs, the sign shop and the call center, officially did not

accept applications from non-American citizens. The manager of the sign shop, Edwards, would confirm this. "Non-American citizens *cannot* work for [the sign shop]. I hired one gentleman once—he was from Cuba. I don't know *how* he made it through the system, but he was here three weeks [before] they [correctional officers] came in and took him out."

Indeed, many Latin American nationals found themselves relegated to food factory or other undesirable work. "If you are born here—Chicanos, whites, blacks—then you get a good job. Then you make [one dollar] per hour," said Raul, a Mexican citizen incarcerated at SSP. He continued:

> If you're *not* born in this country, you go to the food factory. Or you clean bathrooms—clean *shit* as a porter on the yard. … Most of the Mexicans on the yard, they clean the bathrooms. Or they are working over there in the food factory. Why are they not working [better jobs]? Because they don't have English [skills].

For many foreign nationals, restrictions sometimes led to feelings of animosity towards Mexican-American prisoners, whom they perceived as not facing the same limitations in their prison job searches or life in general. "Chicanos get everything free because they speak English well," said one Mexican prisoner. "They get a job, get a license, get a green card. Pshh. For a *Mexican*, life is hard. It's *hard* to be a fucking Mexican in this country." These language limitations may help explain the apparent willingness of foreign nationals

to accept assignments that different groups refused, but this question remains beyond the scope of the current study.

Foreign nationals were also formally barred from assignments that took prisoners beyond the prison walls, including highway cleanup, parks maintenance, and other crews that operated in the county surrounding the institution. While there existed no official justification for the exclusion of these workers from certain positions, many staffers drew on the heuristic of "the headline test." This occupational colloquialism referred to a brief thought experiment that COs relied on when making or justifying on-the-ground decisions. Essentially, it entailed rhetorically asking: "If I make this decision and it goes wrong, will it result in negative newspaper headlines for the prison?" According to this reasoning, COs commonly contended that foreign nationals were barred from programs like the outside crews because negative occurrences (e.g., an escape) would generate damaging press. When I inquired into the lack of foreign nationals employed in certain jobs, one staff member virtually mirrored the statement of Raul above, saying: "It *must* be a regulation. There's no paisas in the sign shop. And they can't work the [outside] crews because that doesn't pass the headline test. So, they get the food factory. Lot of 'em work the yard—porters, grounds crews."

The role of race, ethnicity, & nationality in within-job mobility

Staff members and prisoners alike made frequent statements suggesting that "racial politics" did not inform work dynamics and that racial tensions "get left on the yard." Of the sign shop, for example, a working prisoner named Luisito claimed, "It's like a real job.

And we all work together—all the races." The shop boss, Edwards, made similar statements:

> In the housing units, the blacks won't talk to the whites, the whites won't talk to the Mexicans, the Mexicans won't talk with the blacks. But here, in the shop, everybody works together. They have to. But when they go back to their units, they're completely different. They won't talk to each other—other races. … The first question I ask them—ask any new applicant—is: 'Can you work with all the races? Can you take orders from a black man? Can you *give* orders to a black man?' They'll tell you.

To be sure, different degrees interactions and friendships across racial lines were observable in many work sites. Nevertheless, race, ethnicity, and nationality were not without power in these contexts. Though most crews were "balanced" and members of different races "all work together," demographic characteristics nevertheless frequently factored into the assignment of prisoners to different stations or jobs *within* work sites.

Many expressed concerns over task segregation directly. "It's *very* cliquish on the yard— the different races," said Jared a white prisoner who had recently settled into his position at the sign shop. Referring to the dominant discourse that racial differences are not a factor at work, I asked, "Is it tough to go from that environment—the racial cliquishness [of the yard]—to here?" A slight smirk appeared on his lips at my question. "Oh, in here

I'd say it's even *more* cliquish," came his reply. "How so?" I asked. "Well," he began, thinking over his words carefully. "Everyone's been here so *long*. Like those guys over there?" He gestured towards the vinyl layout station where four white prisoners were hard at work. "[All] white. It's so cliquish. The black dudes," he continued, gesturing towards the screen-printing station where five black prisoners cleaned their work stations following completion of a large sign order. "They treat me more like a human than anyone else in prison. That's why I roll with the blacks over there when I can, at work."

Jared's allusion to the "cliquish" nature of the shop along racial lines, as well as his explanation that "everyone's been here so long," highlights recurring patterns in station assignment. Just as sign shop workers "recruited" and referred their social connections when a new position opened up in the shop, they also had a say in who got assigned to their station. In most instances, new hires began their sign shop careers in the screen-printing station. From here, they learned the basics of the labor process. Then, when a position in another of the primary stations—vinyl layout or metal fabrication—opened up, the prisoners currently assigned to that station once more recruited from amongst the more recent hires. Typically, workers sought to hire friends. One worker, Ship, put it explicitly:

> *We're* in charge of [work station assignments]. Let's say you worked in screens and you wanted to work over on computers. But you *can't* because it's full up. When there *is* an opening, they already got somebody lined up for the position. You see. So maybe you get *frustrated* cause you

> wanna learn the computers! … You see who's working on the computers, don't ya? They [whites] keep they *own.*

According to Ship and Jared, white prisoners tended to dominate the vinyl layout station, where they designed signage on computers and produced their creations using a large vinyl printer. Through the use of digital design capabilities, this station resembled the way that sign production is accomplished in the outside world today. The screen-printing station, on the other hand, relied on an outmoded process—mixing and spreading colored ink over large screen stencils to transfer images. Though once the dominant method in the industry, screen printing is no longer utilized in outside shops. Many workers expressed interest in working with vinyl, but black workers often faced difficultly transferring out of screens, resulting in limited opportunity to learn or develop these more marketable skills.

Tensions sometimes rose when individuals felt their mobility restricted. D.S., an older black prisoner, was hired at the sign shop and, like most, was first stationed in screen printing. Recognizing that this was where new workers often began, he was initially hopeful that he would soon be able to transfer to more modern tasks once he had mastered the traditional screen-printing process. During his first week on the job, he shared his plan: "See, this shit we doin' with the ink? It's obsolete. It's all [done with] computers now. That's why I'm trying to get over *there* to design." After a month, however, D.S. had still not managed to transfer, despite seeing other recent hires move to other stations. Visibly frustrated one day, he waived me over and said:

> Hey, Mr. G? When you're doing your interviews, have you learned about the criteria for working out here? Like, they ask us, 'Are you okay working with everyone—different races? You gotta be okay with everyone!' Okay? Well, you see how it is for *real*—you pick up on that? How the Europeans all over *there* [vinyl], Mexicans over *there* [metal fabrication], and we're over *here* [screens]. Now ain't that some shit?

He pointed to each respective station, signaling the racial divides amongst the men working. At that moment, a cluster of white men crowded around the large table in the vinyl layout station, three Mexican-Americans cut and sanded metal sheets in the metal fabrication station, and a small group of black workers prepped materials in the screen-printing area alongside D.S. Shaking his head, he turned back to his work mixing fresh ink, resigned to his station for the time being.

While the sorting of workers into different stations within the sign shop was driven by prisoners themselves—as a result of the relatively greater degree of autonomy that these workers were afforded—such divisions were not unique to "good prison jobs." For instance, the food factory, which was commonly derided as the "worst prison job" and a "prison within the prison," resembled the sign shop in terms of these patterns of task segregation. However, prisoners there had no input into the job assignment process.

The three largest stations within the food factory were the warehouse, where prisoners shelved and inventoried dry food goods; the sandwich shop, where workers compiled sandwich ingredients; and the meat prep station, where men wrapped slices of lunch meat in plastic. Participants oft referred to meat prep as a "Mexican job" because it was populated almost entirely with "paisas." Barba, a Mexican-American man who worked for the private firm managing food operations, was in charge of populating this crew. He hired foreign nationals more often than not. Barba's hiring practices were not appreciated by some working prisoners. One white participant, frustrated at not being able to secure a job as a meat slicer on the crew, angrily referred to him as a "racist bastard" who "only hires Mexicans." Barba, however, would defend his actions as the result of a "colorblind" approach to hiring. When a DOC representative instructed that work stations be "mixed"—i.e., desegregated—Barba informed me that he did not "pay attention to the race" of his workers. Instead, he refused to alter the composition of his station, insisting that he sees all prisoners as the same: "I only see orange."

Not all staffers agreed with Barba's practices. A more recently-hired man, Davis, grew angry with Barba after his entire Mexican crew skipped work one day: "This is what happens when you hire only one race to a job, dude." When Barba shrugged off the comment, Davis vented to me: "He only hired Mexican guys to work meat. They decided to skip work yesterday, so—*tsk*." With a shrug he added, "That's what happens when you don't mix it up!" Months later, Davis would be assigned to oversee the meat prep station. Despite his earlier protestations over Barba's hiring practices, he too refused to "mix it up." Acquiescing to this now-standard practice, Davis justified the continuation of primarily hiring foreign nationals as "being consistent." This, he said, was key "because you don't

want to start anything new in there [as it may] make them work less hard than they are." Since the other major food factory stations remained largely "racially balanced," he expressed that he had some leeway in maintaining his single-race crew. "Everybody starts in the sandwich shop—it's mixed race all in [that station]. It's black, white. It's just [not like that] in *my* area—it can kind of be the Mexican area."

Discussion: Teaching Rocks to Sink

Labor stratification pervaded Sunbelt State Penitentiary. This chapter has discussed the ways in which working prisoners were sorted into labor assignments within a diverse, hierarchal prison employment system via various formal and informal sorting mechanisms. In this process, the prison did not approach work as a means to transfer skills and outlooks that prisoners lacked, despite claims to this effect from policymakers (e.g., Benns 2015; Brown and Severson 2011). Instead, ethnographic data reveal that the contemporary penal facility sorts imprisoned men into work sites for which they already possess the requisite abilities or resources—adhering to a racialized *market logic* in the allocation of labor assignments. Few behind bars possess marketable job skills, valued certifications, privileged self-presentation styles, knowledge regarding formal market procedures, or advantageous social ties to assist in the job search (Arum and LaFree 2008; Pettit and Western 2004; Wakefield and Uggen 2010). Nevertheless, these and other forms of capital were regularly necessary for success in the internal prison employment system. The prison, already operating at the "lowest rungs" of society (Western and Pettit 2010), sieves and

categorizes social actors in a manner which further stratifies this already vulnerable population. As in the free world, it was the *combination* of prisoners' capitals which often facilitated success within the local field. Particular forms of capital often overlapped or interacted. Race and social capital, for instance, were directly linked via prison racial politics. What's more, prisoners possessing a broad variety of valued capitals—e.g., work skills and ties to connected others—tended to thrive.

Most prominently, these findings demonstrate that imprisoned minorities face continual hurdles to higher-status work site and task assignments, revealing underlying racialized patterns of exclusion. It is through these processes that ethnoracial economic and labor hierarchies are maintained behind bars. In addition to compounding disadvantages through the warehousing of minority populations as outlined by Wacquant (2000) and others (e.g., Smith and Hattery 2008), the prison reflects and aggravates inequalities at the organizational level through internal structures and practices. Racialized perceptions of work and workers often shaped official procedures at SSP. In the pursuit of high-paying work in the call center, for instance, cultural and social capital requirements masked racial barriers to prisoner mobility. Minority applicants were often penalized for "sounding ghetto" or exhibiting an accent over the phone. Whether purposefully or not, this program virtually excluded black and Latino prisoners by prizing conventionally white, middle-class styles of speech (see Alim et al. 2016).

Similarly, within work sites, non-white workers were often limited in their ability to secure desirable task assignments because they lacked the resources necessary to move between stations. Social ties were particularly valuable to this end. Although race shapes personal and professional networks in the free world (e.g., Royster 2003), social capital

appeared even more racialized in the carceral context in keeping with pervasive systems of racial politics. These norms and codes limited whether, when, and in what capacity prisoners of different races could interact and could be enforced through violence. As such, it was oftentimes difficult for minority actors to establish strong connections with potentially better-connected whites. This was exemplified, for example, by the black prisoners relegated to the outmoded screen-printing station in the sign shop as white prisoners acted as gatekeepers to the more modern vinyl printing station. Here as at other points in the prison employment system, racial politics and institutional structure were intertwined.

These findings align with Bourdieu's illustration of the role of key institutions in the reification of social categories. Bourdieu (1996) proffers that, by privileging those already endowed with the skills and dispositions that they are said to transfer, key social institutions may function to consecrate "sacred" groups through "rite of institution," fueling the production of a nobility. They do so, in part, by employing "recruitment procedures [which] are so obviously designed to guarantee them students already endowed, through their background, with the dispositions they require that we have to wonder whether, as the Romans used to say, they aren't merely 'teaching fish to swim'" (Bourdieu 1996: 73). Like prestigious educational institutions at the top of the social hierarchy, the prison—which instead operates at the "lowest rungs" of society (Western and Pettit 2010)—acts as a *sieve*, filtering and categorizing social actors. Inverting the function of the school, however, the prison instead signifies the profane, producing and reproducing an underclass (see Irwin 1985). Put another way, if elite schools simply "teach fish to swim," then the prison employment system may be said to "teach rocks to sink." As such, it is not

merely the case that society prepares some for school while priming others for prison (Goffman 2015). Rather, this highlights the prison's role as part of a larger tapestry of social reproduction. The mechanisms underlying the reification of social barriers between the poor and rich—as between the incarcerated and free—also act to exacerbate disparities within the narrower range of social class representing the prisoner population.

The costs of incarceration are shifted to the incarcerated in many ways (e.g., Gibson-Light 2018). In an era of slimming prison budgets (Gottschalk 2010) and persistently high rates of imprisonment (Garland 2001a), this institution draws on the labor power of the incarcerated to financially support—or at least mitigate the expenses of—overcrowded, economically strained facilities. The expansive scale of this labor, the manner in which prisoners are assigned to work, and the processes through which such labor is extracted are not experienced by all prisoners in the same way. Disparities in work opportunities and experiences pose considerable consequences for incarcerated workers. The next two chapters examine variation in working prisoners' carceral experiences, both in terms of subjectivities and the pursuit of personal dignity, as well as materially in terms of access and power in formal and informal prison economies.

CHAPTER 3

The Dignity of Working Inmates:

Prisoner Strategies and Workplace Games

> Every man, whoever he may be and however humiliated, still requires …respect for his human dignity. The prisoner himself knows that he is a prisoner, an outcast, and he knows his place before his superior; but no brands, no fetters will make him forget that he is a human being.
>
> – Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from a Dead House*

Carceral labor, a core facet of punishment in the contemporary American prison (Hatton 2017), shapes how prisoners experience and understand their time behind bars. During observations and interviews with working prisoners at Sunbelt State Penitentiary (SSP), a sense of pride in one's work and the pursuit of dignity were central to participants' "penal subjectivities"—that is, the ways in which they oriented to and made meaning of punishment (Sexton 2015). Yet, worker dignity is oft perceived as only tangentially related to organizational agendas (Hodson 2001) and the dignity of prisoners has waned as a priority of the nation's penal institutions (Simon 2014). For the prisoner, as for the free citizen, "life demands dignity and meaningful work is essential for dignity" (Hodson 2001: 3). Seeking or "safeguarding" personal dignity is a primary motivation of worker action in general (e.g., Lamont 2002; Thompson and Newsome 2016). The present research reveals, however, that working prisoners are not all able to engage in such pursuits equally. Rather

than representing a cohesive group or caste facing a singular "prison experience," the incarcerated encounter and understand punishment in a variety of ways, resulting in different outcomes for different individuals or groups (see Kruttschnitt et al. 2013). At SSP, where one was assigned to work directly shaped their day-to-day experience of incarceration. Different labor assignments fostered divergent penal environments and facilitated distinctive forms of prisoner action.

In this chapter, I turn toward one consequence of the penal employment system operating as a sieve. Namely, I examine differences in participants' carceral experiences and senses of self-worth along the lines of prisoners' approaches to dignity. Prisoner strategies and practices to these ends were constrained by labor context. Those who succeeded in acquiring "good prison jobs" at SSP were afforded more opportunities to *inject* dignity back into their lives through their work. Their counterparts working low- or mid-tier prison jobs, however, were often more occupied with strategies to *tolerate* or *defy* indignity—engaging in resisting negative perceptions, with fewer outlets to actively pursue positive self-images.

The structure of the prison workplace is fraught with hurdles to the acquisition of dignity for incarcerated laborers. Indeed, the contemporary American prison—and the state prison system in particular—often approaches human dignity as directly opposed to the agendas of prison bureaucracies (Simon 2017), which increasingly prioritize budgetary concerns and incapacitation over rehabilitation (e.g., Gottschalk 2010). Nevertheless, working prisoners in my study strategized against indignity in creative ways. Although the sorting systems through which prisoners were assigned to jobs greatly limited the mobility of many (as detailed in Chapter 2), the men of SSP were far from mere objects of

manipulation or abstractions lacking agency. They enacted such expressions of the "ubiquitous resistance of everyday life" (Burawoy 1979: 77) through social games played on the prison shop floor.

In what follows, I approach working prisoners' practices and strategies as different forms of "work games" (Burawoy 1979), which enabled them to work together to tolerate and defy many indignities of prison life. An emerging literature has explored the role of prisoner dignity in administrative and legislative approaches to prison operations (e.g., van Zyl Smit and Snacken 2009; Whitman 2003). To compliment these top-down approaches, I investigate the on-the-ground perceptions and practices of prisoners in such pursuits. To this end, I illustrate patterns of strategic action through which participants expressed their identities and sought or professed self-worth.

Different work environments facilitated distinct forms of worker action, in turn differentially enabling or limiting prisoners' quests for dignity. I unpack three forms of collective work games observed on the prison shop floor. Each represents a different approach to challenges to dignity. First, I outline prisoner "coping games"—ritualized distractions from formal work routines aimed at breaking up the "long day's grind" (Roy 1959)—which offered playful diversions that helped participants *tolerate* indignity. Although they took different shapes, such games were observed amongst all prisoner crews, each facing various challenges germane to prison life. Next, I describe prisoner "resistance games" (Burawoy 1979; Sallaz 2015), through which workers in low-tier, undesirable work sites butted heads with overseers over despotic labor processes and staff expressions of arbitrary authority. These involved more forceful assertions of agency, enabling workers to express collective discontent and overtly *defy* indignity. Lastly, in

upper-tier work programs, which were desired in part for their less-driven working environments and more "businesslike" management, participants engaged in what I refer to as a "professionalism game." Through this, they sought overseer approval as well as distinction from "lower tier" prisoners by adopting and performing the role of professional workers—contemporaries of workers in their fields in the outside world. Through processes of "mock professionalization"—i.e., emulating professional status in a context in which they could not formally be classified as such—these working prisoners actively sought to reclaim or *reinject* dignity into their daily lives and labors.

Incarcerated workers at SSP experienced and understood self-worth (and punishment more broadly) in markedly different ways that mapped on to differences in their work environments and corresponding opportunities for action. However, the prevalence of "wage work [behind bars] enhances the likelihood of group cohesion and collective action … but it will also create a powerful discipline, an investment in conformity, as it were" (Weiss 2001: 278). As such, the social games in which they engaged also served to engender consent to overarching penal labor structures and reify divisions between prisoner groups.

Work Games & the Pursuit of Dignity

A *work game* may be conceptualized as a set of collectively adopted strategies and norms through which workers alter, maneuver, or otherwise endure the labor process by drawing "from a repertoire of skills and accumulated knowledge" towards desired outcomes (Halpin

2013: 311; see also, Mollick and Rothbard 2014). Such games help laborers the world over endure the rigors of work (for early treatments, see Roy 1959; Whyte 1955). According to Sharone (2014), "games may arise in virtually any area of social life where social structures generate uncertainty over obtaining a desired outcome and where agents have some discretion to engage in strategic actions in an attempt to achieve this outcome" (190). For the nation's many working prisoners, addressing the issues of their limited autonomy, marginal remuneration, and poor treatment—i.e., the *indignities* of penal labor—is a priority (Hatton 2017). Work games offer an outlet through which to tolerate, defy, or reframe these conditions.

The concept of "dignity" has not traditionally been a concrete one. Indeed, its definition has shifted both colloquially and in legislation over the years (Simon 2017). In assessing various usages throughout legal history, Henry (2010) identifies five key, overlapping components of dignity. These are: "institutional status," "equality," "liberty," "personal integrity," and "collective virtue." In a more general sense, we may understand dignity to represent a basic sense of belonging or participation in the social world (Pugh 2009). Although many international courts recognize prisoner rights to dignity along these lines (Van Zyl Smit and Snacken 2009; Waldron 2009) , the incarcerated are systematically stripped of such entitlements in the U.S. (Demleitner 2014; Snacken 2015; Whitman 2003), despite frequent Supreme Court references to dignity (Henry 2010). To be sure, the deprivation of the basics of personhood is a central feature of U.S. penal punishment. Upon entering this institution, "the individual's picture of himself as a person of value…begins to waver and grow dim" (Sykes 1958: 79).

In the absence of equitable access to resources and outlets for expression (Goffman 1961), the nation's prisoners turn instead to local "economies of dignity" (Pugh 2009)—that is, local meanings systems through which they may ascertain which characteristics are privileged, assert value, and maintain positive self-images. Rhodes (2004), in a rare qualitative examination of supermax security penal facilities, illustrates that prisoners remain driven by a desire for respect and to have their humanity or personal "being" recognized. In one exchange reported between a prisoner and his psychiatrist, the man's work history as a carpenter and his identity as someone who "like[s] to work with my hands" provided a critical therapeutic anchor in working through trauma resulting from dehumanizing carceral experiences (Rhodes 2004: 109). This illustration highlights that, in prison as in the free world, the nature of one's work identity endures as a feature central to perceptions of worth (see Hodson 2001; Lamont 2002).

Participating in work games may offer further material and psychological rewards that map on to features of dignity that prisoners seek. Collective games may serve to raise status and earnings, pass time and fight boredom, assert shared demands and challenge inequities, demonstrate or reproduce group norms and values, or establish and reify boundaries (Burawoy 1979). They "emerge historically out of struggle and bargaining, but they are played within limits" set by the labor process and workplace structure (Burawoy 1979: 80). To be sure, workers may benefit from the act of participation in as well as the outcomes of work games; yet, because they must be played within the rules and norms set by management, to participate in these social games is to implicitly consent to the conditions surrounding their emergence and enforcement (Bourdieu 1996; Burawoy 1982).

Along these lines, overseers in the free world often allow—or even facilitate—such games to the extent that they do not threaten the organization's overarching objectives.

Despite the prevalence of prisoner labor historically in the United States, scholars of labor and the labor process have paid limited attention to the micro- and meso-level structure, nature, and practice of work behind bars, especially as it relates to penal subjectivities. What few insights have been made into the on-the-ground dynamics of prison work experiences, strategies, competition, and other facets of carceral labor often emerge as tangential remarks supplementing other agendas (for instance, see Jacobs 1977: 46-49). To the extent that prison scholars have emphasized work, they have often focused on abstract questions of morality and exploitation (Thompson 2011). Perhaps ironically, this literature has overlooked the actual practices through which incarcerated workers try—and succeed, and fail—to rise above exploitation and achieve dignity, status, and positive self-image. This chapter seeks to emphasize these processes by mobilizing the labor process paradigm literature from the sociology of labor, which has been utilized to address similar questions in the free world.

Traditionally, the labor process paradigm approaches worker games as situated in particular eras of political-economic development. For instance, under the pre-Fordist regimes of the 19th and early 20th centuries, worker coping and resistance games thrived in response to standardization, deskilling, and despotic control in non-prison contexts (e.g., Braverman 1974; Roy 1959). The Fordist era of the mid-20th-Century saw the emergence of different forms of worker action, such as "learning games" and "reward games," through which employees gamified training processes to counter automation and systems of indirect control (Burawoy 1979). In the post-Fordist era, with the rise of the service sector

and precarious employment, work games continue to evolve as workers seek security and self-worth in an uncertain world of work (Lopez 2007; Sallaz 2015).

In spite of these transitions in economic production, the US prison system operates in a sort of virtual bubble, largely untouched by traditional labor legislation ensuring worker protections. Although the contemporary prison contributes to or participates in consumer markets via goods and services produced through penal labor (Bair 2008; Pryor 2005; Scott and Derrick 2006), it is not held to the same standards in terms of worker rights or safeguards (Thompson 2011; Zatz 2009). That is, "prisons do not need to adhere to a number of federal and state standards for the workplace, such as the Fair Standards Labor Act" (Pryor 2005:10). Because of this, trends in the organization of penal labor do not directly mirror those in the outside world. Large-scale production programs deskill work tasks and drive workers in ways reminiscent of pre-Fordist regimes, drawing from large, captive pools of unskilled labor to address turnover. However, evoking more recent approaches to management, skilled penal work sites may adopt more obscured or hegemonic systems to control workers, diminishing turnover of their skilled workers and, more importantly (since such workers are less common in the prison system and harder to replace) fostering an internal sense of dedication and productivity (Edwards 2011). In turn, workers in this unique labor-legal site employ forms of strategic action befitting each respective labor process and managerial style that they may encounter.

Though conditions vary between work sites, prison institutions nevertheless dictate whether, when, and where individuals must work, provide limited opportunities for personal development or expressions of individuality, and exercise seemingly arbitrary power in hiring, firing, and workplace punishment (Sykes 1958; Irwin 2005). At SSP,

working prisoners' daily lives were strictly regimented by the institution. Nevertheless, prisoners managed to exercise small degrees of autonomy (often in brief windows) to engage in strategic action—or forms of "secondary adjustments" (Goffman 1961)—against the tensions of the prison labor system, challenges of the labor process, and indignities of prison life.

Indignity at Sunbelt State Penitentiary

Despite historical efforts to become recognized as such, working prisoners are not categorized as formal employees (Thompson 2011; Zatz 2009). Lacking formal status, penal laborers are denied many employment guarantees and protections (Pryor 2005) and the question of their dignity is not prioritized by institutional administrations nor by frontline employees (Simon 2017). In lower-status work sites within the prison employment system, these challenges were often exacerbated. For instance, prisoners working less stable, more despotically managed jobs had little recourse against imbalanced and nontransparent hiring practices (see Chapter 2). Additionally, workers faced opaque firing practices. As one staff member put it, "[we] don't have to have a paper trail to fire somebody." This was especially apparent in the food factory, where turnover was very high. Demotions occurred regularly, often without explanation. One participant expressed discontent when moved from the freezer section, which he enjoyed, to meat prep, an entry-level position which he despised. "That *bitch* [manager] fired me," he shouted when I

commented on the move. When asked why, he responded: "I dunno—she wouldn't tell me. Fucking *bullshit!*"

Prisoner pay is also unreliable. Working prisoners nationwide may be denied wages or receive compensation much below wage minimums. Despite attempts to increase pay over the years (e.g., Zatz 2009), most state and federal prisoners today are estimated to make less than $1.00 per hour (Pryor 2005). The average minimum pay for state prisoners is approximately $0.89 per hour; the average minimum wage for federal prisoners is even lower, at approximately $0.23 per hour (ibid.). At SSP, many could expect to earn between $0.05 to $0.50, which corresponded to around $4.00 per week for most after deductions for various prison fees. This weekly wage was roughly equivalent, for instance, to six 3oz packs of ramen noodle soup or one tube of toothpaste in the prison commissary (formal and informal prison economies are detailed in Chapter 4). Participants frequently complained about take-home pay. As one worker, Rich, expressed: "I'm not happy about the pay. If anything, I barely get by. I'm not talking about *wants*, I'm talking about *needs!*" he exclaimed. "It's not enough."

If injured on the job or ill, prisoners missed out on other protections. One working prisoner lamented the lack of worker's compensation, for instance:

> We get no workman's comp. If we get hurt on the job, we have to go to medical in the yard—and we *still* get charged the *four*-dollar medical fee just for the visit. That's several days' pay right there! Plus, to go to medical, you have to miss work and you don't get paid

> for that. So that's at least a week's wages right there just for getting injured at your own damn job.

Many reported skipping medical appointments to afford other expenses. On one occasion, I witnessed one man castigating another for having visited the nurse instead of purchasing additional food:

> That's *four* dollars. Four dollars could'a bought two packets of squeeze cheese, a can of chili with beans, *and* tortillas. That's a burrito—three burritos each! We could'a been eating good, but instead, you decided to go to the doctor. We could be *eatin'*, but you blew it on the doc. Don't be goin' to the doctor.

Another challenge faced by incarcerated laborers was that they lacked reliable grievance systems and trusted advocates. As Calavita and Jenness (2015) reveal, prison grievance systems are often convoluted, slow, and outmoded, with prisoners reporting feelings of powerlessness and frustration when attempting to make their voices heard. At SSP, low-tier workers reported particularly little certainty with regards to these processes. Responding to the suggestion that he approach his food factory managers with concerns, one participant scoffed: "One of *them*? No way! … They don't care about grievances unless it comes from the warden." When asked if appealing to the warden was effective, he shrugged: "Not that I've ever seen." Writing a letter to the warden's office was a slow process, reliant on the internal mail system, removed from the actual workplace. What's

more, appealing to higher-ranking prison officials such as this entailed risk, since it required prisoners to link their names to criticisms via the letter.

Instead of finding a dependable outlet to whom to express concerns, prisoners sometimes faced overt disrespect and dehumanization from many work site overseers. When failing to recall a particular prisoner's name, for instance, one manager remarked with a laugh: "There's only one of me, but I don't know how many of *you* I've seen in the past 24 hours!" Expressions of arbitrary authority were also common. While one incarcerated worker transported a wheeled, top-heavy cart of supply boxes one day, a correctional officer appeared and immediately chided him for his untucked shirt:

CO: Tuck your shirt in.

PRISONER: What?

CO: You *deaf?*

PRISONER: No. How am I supposed to do that while I'm pushing *a-hundred-eighty-five pounds?*

CO: Improvise!

The CO marched around the corner while the worker struggled to tuck his shirt in with one hand and steer with the other. The cart swerved a bit, nearly toppling, but he managed to stuff in his shirt without a spill. Groaning in agitation, he put two hands back on the handles and pushed on.

Unannounced security checks, which brought work to a halt, often involved additional expressions of arbitrary authority. On a semi-regular basis, CO K9 units

performed sweeps of different workplaces. This occurred during one particularly busy afternoon in the sign shop. To the surprise of the prisoners as well as the shop managers, two COs strolled in leading two dark German Shepherds by short ropes. Despite being enmeshed in a large work order, when the dogs arrived, every participant was immediately ordered to cease working. One officer ordered all of the workers to step outside with a jarring bark: "Everybody out! Now!" After the men had all filed out the rear exit, the officer counted them twice and announced to his partner, "I count 30!" He then turned in the direction of the men and, peering through his mirrored sunglasses, instructed them to "Listen up! Stand up straight, backs to the fence." The prisoners lined up, shoulder-to-shoulder along a nearby chain-link fence, as the second officer walked his dog around to the other side. The first officer continued: "Do no *lean* against the fence! Do not stick your fingers *through* the fence. He [the dog] *will* eat them! I promise you that." The men stiffened up. Some darted their eyes to the side to try and monitor their K9 examiner. Meanwhile, the dog's handler led him on a first pass behind the men, allowing the dog to sniff each prisoner individually. The first officer then shouted: "Alright, squat *down!*" The men, no strangers to this procedure, crouched down in near unison. The dog walked behind them for a second time, making a close inspection of each man's backside while emitting rapid, hoarse snorts.

Following a positive nod from his partner, the lead CO turned and announced, "Okay. Everybody stay here." The two officers clutched the taut leashes and led the dogs into the shop, where they zig-zagged from front-to-back, sniffing every table, material, and piece of equipment in sight. Afterwards, the second officer exited unceremoniously through the front shop door—having never spoken a word—and the first officer held a

quiet conversation with Dempsey, one of the sign shop managers. Neither acknowledged the men in orange, still standing near the chain-link fence outside. After waiting several minutes with no instruction, one worker, Jon, slowly approached the CO. "Can I go back in there, sir?" he asked apprehensively. "I need to finish [cleaning] up the bathrooms." Snapping his head towards Jon, the officer sharply replied, "*Yeah*. It's all *clear!*" Jon shrugged towards his fellow prisoners, scooped up his nearby bucket and rag, and walked back into the shop. The others, cautiously assuming that this meant they too could get back to work, slowly shuffled toward their stations. Some eyed the CO, anticipating some additional utterance or instruction, but the officer seemed to ignore their presence.

In addition to challenges within the workplace, participants also described indignities when trying to get to work. Securing reliable clothing and other goods was a constant struggle (discussed more in Chapter 4). Boots represented a particular challenge. Without them, prisoners were not allowed to work and would be turned away at the gate before the morning bus. The institution was required to provide adequate footwear but supply of decent boots often ran low. Many waited weeks or sometimes months for new footwear to arrive. In the meantime, they were unable to work and many lost desirable positions after being unable to attend for lengths of time. When new boots were available, acquiring them was sometimes a frustrating process. Soto, a diligent worker from the food factory, recounted one such struggle:

SOTO: I went to get new boots yesterday because mine were *wasted*. There was one sergeant and two officers in there and they was like, 'What's

wrong with your boots?' Sayin' like, 'The guys who work outside have worse boots than these!' Trying to shame me, bro. So, I was like 'Shit, whatever. I just won't go to *work* tomorrow, then.' They're like 'Get back here—you know you getting new boots.'

RESEARCHER: So, they gave them to you?

SOTO: Yeah, eventually. I don't know why they gotta *shame* me like that, though. I'm constantly on my feet—walking in the moisture and shit in those coolers. My boots get wasted like every two or three months, but they keep giving out these cheap shitty boots.

Beyond equipment challenges, the actual trek to work was dehumanizing for many. Any who worked off of the yard—that is, those who had to be transported to a secondary site within or without the prison, such as the sign shop, food factory, auto garage, highway cleanup crews, etc.—had to pass through the *strip shack* before and after each work day. Here, they were stripped naked in groups and inspected for hidden contraband. Lemmy, from the sign shop, described it:

> They strip you butt-ass naked, seven guys at a time. 'Spread your cheeks, lift your sack'—that sort of thing. That's for anybody that

> leaves the yard. Lotta guys don't like leaving the yard and dealing with that. Once you master that hurdle though, you can start looking for better jobs outside the yard. But it's a pain in the ass. [pausing] Sometimes literally.

With the exception of the call center, most of the jobs that were located on the housing yard and thus free from the strip shack were low-paying, deskilled, and undesirable. This included such positions as "rake pusher," "cigarette butt collector," grounds crew, or trash collector. To seek a higher-tier job, then, was to endure the twice-daily mortification of the strip search.

These factors culminated in a general sense of indignity towards incarcerated workers. Many dreaded coming to work. According to one man, "I feel better as soon as I get home. But when I'm here I don't *feel* well." Shaking his head with a distressed look on his face, he continued. "As soon as the bus pulls up to take me here—'Ughhh.' It wears me down." These men faced criticisms and harsh treatments on a regular basis. To be sure, many staff members regarded carceral labor as merely a facet of punishment, rejecting workers' assertions of legitimacy. Work, according to one CO, was important for the management of the prison population: "Otherwise, they sit in the yard all day, getting in trouble." Such outlooks toward carceral labor are by no means unique to Sunbelt State. Jacobs (1977), for instance, recounts similar trends at Illinois' Stateville Penitentiary in the mid-20th-Century, noting that officials relied on carceral labor to "coerce the inmate into a conformity that would ultimately produce a respect for the rules" as well as "reinforce

control by keeping inmates busy rather than providing job training," all while publicly framing penal labor as a rehabilitative institution (p. 46-47).

At SSP, prisoners resented such treatment, stating that: "They're just trying to punish us. They show authority instead of showing gratitude for us working here." Another complained, "They call work a 'privilege,' but we're *required* to do it. … If work is a privilege, then why do we get in trouble if we decide not to do it?" One exclaimed, "There's no appreciation for what we do in here."

All prisoners face processes of mortification and the pains of imprisonment (Sykes 1958). Working prisoners across sites at SSP engaged in work games in order to tolerate the indignities that they faced. Yet, variation in the structure and management of different workplaces lead to these games taking different forms (with different goals and consequences). In addition, certain workplaces were home to multiple social games, representing overlapping prisoner responses to indignity. In less desirable positions, participants faced compound struggles—being subjected to overt systems of surveillance and direct control from overseers in addition to deskilling and monotony. The next section will detail the work games that emerged in response to these varied conditions. To begin, all working prisoners engaged in *coping games*, through which they endeavored to tolerate the indignities of prison life and endure each work day.

Coping Games

The practices of many working prisoners at SSP sometimes paralleled those recounted in traditional studies of worker action. For instance, where working prisoners were subject to direct control from overseers, or in the face of long hours and boredom, they drew on "coping games" to better tolerate undignified work and break up periods of monotony (e.g., Roy 1959)—common under systems of direct control (Sallaz 2015). In the prison context, however, such conditions were magnified, as were the stakes of prisoners' work games. Prisoner time is strictly regimented (Clemmer 1940; Goffman 1961) and getting through the length of a prison sentence often requires effort and creativity (Guilbaud 2010). Control and surveillance, too, are necessarily heightened behind bars, where institutional architecture has been honed to increasingly monitor and restrict (Foucault 1977; Irwin 2005). What's more, punishments may be severe—any perceived misstep or insubordination could result in loss of privileges, extended sentencing, or transfer to a higher custody prison yard. Knowing the risks and working around surveillance and oversight structures, penal laborers strategically engaged in agentic play.

Coping games were readily apparent in the food factory, where working prisoners were subject to intense oversight in the performance of deskilled, monotonous work tasks. These games were often relatively simple in nature and took such forms as prisoners impersonating the gruff shouts of the CO when he barked announcements such as "LUNCH!!" or "COUNT TIME!!" through the window of his security post. The men would mimic his gravelly voice, shouting "*Count tiiiiime!!*" or grunting harshly in no particular direction, gradually "one-upping" each other in volume in a sort of vocal "hot

potato" game. Other call-and-response games arose when the men grew restless. Slick, a sharp-eyed white prisoner in his early 30s who operated as an informal "inmate manager" of the meat prep station, was notorious for initiating such moments. During a lull in bologna rolling one day, he hopped up and down briskly. Suddenly, in a high-pitched voice, he yelled out, "Can I get a *whoop, whoop!*" A few scattered "whoops" came in response from different stations throughout the food factory. Unsatisfied, he continued, "I said: Whoop! *WHOOP!*" The calls came back louder until CO Byrne emerged from his security office to quell the noise and Slick strolled away with a guilty grin on his face. Slick was also known to spontaneously blurt out seemingly random, sexually- and racially-stylized phrases (such as "Ghost ride the dick! Yeah, put ya stunner shades on!") or recite freestyle rap verses to lighten the mood at the work site. One rhyme that scored a particularly positive prisoner reaction was: "Ain't no studio / This here's a prison cell / They ask who I'm rollin' with / But I won't *never* tell!" The prize of these shouting and noise games came in the form of shared amusement at the CO's expressions of frustration when he inevitably yelled "Be *quiet*," prompting snickering from the crew.

The monotonous grind of the food factory work day elicited other forms of play as well. For instance, the baking crew in this site was officially considered "semi-skilled" and indeed performed more varied tasks than the majority of workers. However, on days with particularly large orders for cakes or biscuits, they were driven by management to perform quicker and more efficiently—demands that unskilled laborers faced daily. On such days, they resorted to assembly-line style production techniques: aligned in a row, bakers mechanically prepared batter in the industrial mixer, poured it into large baking sheets, rolled wheeled racks of completed trays into the large oven, flipped fully-baked cakes

upside down onto new trays, sliced each into a grid of even pieces, and wrapped individual cakes in clear plastic trash bags for storage. All the while, a manager shouted occasional orders to "Come on, come on, let's *go!*"

To cope with the repetitive nature of the work and the overbearing nature of management on these days, bakers would seek out small bits of "break time" between major tasks. When possible—that is, when not in the direct sightlines of the CO or civilian managers—bakers sometimes used these breaks to craft "bread bullets": small balls of excess dough the size of marbles that were "fired" at unsuspecting coworkers across the room in the meat prep or sandwich shop stations. After helping load the final rack of trays into the oven one day, I returned to find one baker, Baxter, surreptitiously preparing two bread bullets. Cupping them carefully in his hand, he rounded the corner toward the sandwich shop with a sly grin. Quietly, he shared, "I got fresh *bullets*," opening his palm to reveal his arsenal. He craned his neck into the sandwich shop work station to scope out his target, Rich, who stood facing the other direction, unaware of the impending attack. Waiting until the on-site manager, Margaret, looked away, Baxter expertly flung his throwing arm upwards, lightly tossing one bullet into the air. It floated across the room in a smooth arc, curved downwards, and bounced squarely off the crown of Rich's hair-netted head. Retreating a few steps back, Baxter ducked out of sight of Rich's gaze as he scanned the room, rubbing his head with one eyebrow raised. The others near him looked around as well. Margaret marched over near Rich to see what the distraction was but gave up after the man shrugged and went back to work. Baxter emerged victorious from his hiding spot, chuckling as he approached Rich. "I *knew* it was you," Rich exclaimed with a grin. Quickly patting him on the shoulder, Baxter backed away to return to his work station, lest he risk

the wrath of Margaret for lingering in the sandwich shop. Unbeknownst to him, however, Rich had secreted the dough ball in his hand. Sneaking a glance at Margaret, he blasted it back at Baxter who let out a surprised "Oof!" as it bounced with a muffled thud off his chest. With a laugh, he turned and lightly jogged back to the bakery, saving his second bread bullet for another battle.

Though food factory workers like Baxter attempted to avoid the attention of prison staff members, their antics did not go unnoticed. CO Byrne suggested that he maintained awareness of every prisoner work game. "Whenever I walk around a corner, they fuck around," he told me. "I know that." As long as they did not get too "rowdy," however, he often chose not to intervene. Still, he sought to make sure that they knew he was alert: "Sometimes I stop and watch [instead of walking away] and they freak out. 'Shit! Did he see me? Did he see me??' It's a big game we play here." It was not uncommon to see him halt abruptly in his tracks and stare down a group of prisoners—"They're staring right back at me," he once commented before speeding away again down the hall.

While the CO maintained a watchful eye on coping games around the food factory, other staff members sought to facilitate prisoner play towards more productive ends. In the meat prep station, prisoners spent their entire work days standing in place, rolling slices of bologna or ham into plastic-wrapped bundles. Not surprisingly, the pace often slowed down, and participants regularly grumbled about the work. In an effort to keep the men on task, managers in this station sometimes induced "meat rolling races" between groups of prisoners. Slick, the de facto "inmate manager" of the station, was usually open to the idea of a race. One afternoon, the meat prep staff overseer, Barba, stood tall at the end of the long steel meat rolling table and attempted to goad Slick into a race with another prisoner:

a heavyset Latino man called Pun, who, like Slick, was known to be a particularly fast roller when he wanted to be. "Uh-oh," Barba said to Slick, gesturing toward Pun, "Your competition is picking up speed." Slick, continuing to roll, shot a sideways glance towards Pun's progress. "He's feeling the pressure," another man chimed in. "Okay," Slick conceded, "Let's go, *son!*" With a half grin, Pun accepted: "Let's do this shit."

Almost in sync, each man grabbed two slices of bologna from the tray of meat between them, slapped them down, spun them up in a section of plastic wrap, and tossed the finished product with extra force into the nearby bin, as if to signal with each thud: "Done! Done again!" To speed his wrapping, Slick grasped a plastic spork with which he could more efficiently rip off each sheet of plastic. When one of his plastic gloves began to slip off from the spread of meaty juices, he swiftly tore off a small square of cardboard from the plastic wrap box, put it in the band of his loose glove, and rolled it up around it (like a t-shirt sleeve around a pack of cigarettes) to tighten the wrist. The men did not speak while racing, but each could be seen casting furtive glances at the other's technique. I and the other prisoners at the table joined in as well, trying to meet the pace of Slick and Pun, though most came up short. The game continued for close to 10 minutes as Barba looked on. The unexpected end-of-game buzzer came as CO Byrne shouted, "*Count time!*" to signal that it was time to cease work and line up to be counted. The two piles of rolled meats were too close to declare a sure winner. Making eye contact, the men quickly nodded to one another (a silent commendation of "Good game") and shuffled toward the CO station to be accounted for.

The racial politics of the prison barred these men—one white, one Latino—from engaging in many activities together, such as sharing food or bunk space (Goodman 2014).

Like the monotony and indignity to which they offered brief reprieve, however, prison work games spanned racial and ethnic boundaries. These restrictive norms, it would seem, did not prohibit Slick and Pun from participating in strategic play together. Though clearly orchestrated by management, the meat race in particular functioned to temporarily override boundaries between racial cliques, highlighting their shared status as incarcerated laborers.

The strategic action of copings games was not exclusive to the food factory. In the prison call center, prisoners labored in a very different work environment, yet nevertheless still engaged in forms of coping games to persist amidst the challenges of the workplace and the prison. Much like the meat races described above, prisoners here turned their work duties into a form of competition in order to liven up what were often boring or demoralizing tasks: making repeated cold-call (that is, unsolicited) attempts to sell television advertising time while being surveilled by civilian staff members as well as correctional officers who occasionally entered the office.

Each worker remained acutely aware of their current sales totals and those of others. Modeled after traditional call centers on the outside, workers' successful sales were tallied, regarded as a measure of effort and skill. Two dry erase boards in opposite corners of the long room tracked each salesman's weekly progress. On the windows of the "bubble"—the Plexiglas-walled circular desk space in the middle of the office from which the on-site staff member maintained sight of the entire workforce—were scrawled the current totals in dollars of each month's top seller. Whenever a new sale was made, Jake, the towering, tattooed man with a bellowing voice who operated as the informal "inmate manager" of the sales crew, would produce a dry erase marker to update the totals, often announcing

the update and shouting out words of encouragement to the room. In an effort to bolster morale and spur productivity, he was also known to issue challenges to prisoners or initiate sales contests between them. The owner of the call center firm, Dennis, encouraged this and aimed to facilitate it by dividing the crew up into four permanent teams who selected their own team names and competed for bragging rights.

Individualized forms of competition were also quite effective at maintaining productivity. When a young man called Marshall managed to get his name on the list of the top four salesmen one month, he boastfully called out "Oh yeah, that is how I do!" Jake, who noticed Marshall's display while updating the numbers on the front glass panel of the bubble, slyly replied: "Hey, Marshall, you gonna stay at the bottom of this glass all day?"

"What!?" Marshall shouted back, eyebrows high. "I mean, it's great that you're on the glass, but you're stuck on the bottom of this list," Jake replied. Prodding him further, he added, "Nobody wants to be a *bottom* guy." The obvious sexual implication of Jake's comment appeared to energize Marshall who stood up and said, "*Yo*, is that a *challenge*?"

"I'm thinking it might be."

"Ohhh, okay. Let's do this then. Let's *get* it!" Marshall adjusted his headset, cracked his knuckles, and returned to his seat, leaning forward toward his computer screen. This performance and his intent look signaled that he was "getting down to business" once more. Jake laughed quietly and continued updating the sales numbers.

In addition to prodding along others to improve performance, Jake himself was not opposed to competing. Noticing that his pal Taxi had been having a slow sales day one afternoon, for instance, Jake challenged him to a race. "Yo, Taxi," he called across the floor, "You and me—sell-off!" Half-turning in his chair, Taxi asked: "What? Now?"

"Yup. I'm going for the title of 'best salesman ever…between me and you!'" As Taxi chuckled, Jake continued, "Hey, how 'bout first one to make a sale, the other one does a '*pretty princess*'?" This particular wager was a common one throughout SSP. To "do a pretty princess" meant to stand on one leg, put a pointed finger atop one's head like a ballet dancer, and spin around while shouting the words "I'm a pretty princess! I'm a pretty princess!" A similar performance with which prisoners often challenged one another was to "do a dead dog." This entailed dropping instantly onto one's back, raising the hands and feet up to resemble paws, and rolling back and forth while howling like a dog. Both involved the voluntary mortification of the loser of the bet, with the "pretty princess" in particular (much like Jake's insinuation to Marshall that he was "a bottom guy") drawing on prisoner norms of masculinity (see Jewkes 2005).

Sealing the bet with a nod, the men turned back to their computer terminals and got to work. They each made repeated calls for some time. After nearly two hours, Taxi's arms shot into the air, victorious. Knowing immediately that he had lost, Jake leaned dramatically back in his seat and exhaled. "Ahhh, no!" With a shake of his head, he stood up and held out his arms to signal that he was preparing to make an announcement: "Hey, everyone. I'm a pretty princess." As he spun around, he raised his voice and added: "I'm a pretty *princess!* Taxi is the best salesman *ever!*" Men at nearby cubicles stopped to watch and chuckled. Grinning, Jake took his seat and pointed to his opponent, saying, "Nice job, Taxi. You earned it!"

Another way that incarcerated call center workers coped with their work—which, in addition to being tedious, could be demoralizing when one hit a "slow streak" or was forced to interact with hostile customers at the other end of the line—was through a form

of cathartic joking. After completing a call with a particularly challenging individual or being hung up on, the men would often pretend that the call was ongoing, spouting quiet insults into the dead phone line. When one man was hung up on, he pretended to close a fictional sale, modifying the wording of the closing script: "So, just to confirm, sir, you wear girdles and dresses and high heeled shoes? *Okay*, sir." Struggling through the end of a call with a "rude woman," another man maintained decorum before shifting dramatically once she had hung up the phone: "Ok, ma'am, well *thank* you for your time and enjoy the rest of your day. Okay. Go *shit* yourself, bitch." The game of this involved maintaining a professional tone even through the harshest of insults, such that staff members would be unlikely to note the quip, but nearby coworkers might overhear and collude in the frustration and release. On rarer occasions, prisoners would voluntarily re-engage with especially abrasive customers, or set them up to receive future calls. Rather than marking them as "not interested, do not call back" in the computer system, some would instead indicate them as "very interested, pursue," leaving their files open for others to call. Fulfilling these small acts of revenge operated as an inside joke amongst prisoners. Smoking cigarettes during designated breaks—as a form of "weak culture" (Schultz and Breiger 2010)—seemed to especially elicit venting about these irritations. At these times, the men shared horror stories and laughed over customer insults as a means to persist in the face of long hours, heavy surveillance, and stress of sales work in the prison context.

Resistance Games

Work-related social identity may be precarious and regularly tested or rejected (Leidner 2016). Beyond merely tolerating workplace and prison challenges, workers often responded to such rejections by engaging in collective struggles to actively push back against indignity. Resistance games (Burawoy 1979)—or "individual grievances transformed into collective action" (Sallaz 2015: 4)—are one means of accomplishing this. "Resistance occurs across a wide range of workplaces, but it can be expected to be most common in workplaces where anomic conditions prevail," as well as "in situations characterized by overwork and exploitation" (Hodson 2001: 60). Workplace resistance games (or "war games" [Roy 1959]) blossomed in the least desirable work sites at SSP for this reason. Within the varied prison employment system, the food factory most exhibited these characteristics and, as such, workers here frequently participated in collective violation of institutional regulations, rendering transgressions into assertions of autonomy amidst arbitrary authority (this may also be conceptualized as "friction" [Rubin 2015]).

A *snacking game* was a central component of worker resistance in the food factory. In the contemporary prison, prisoners increasingly express autonomy and power through food activities and practices, or "foodways" (Smoyer 2016b; Ugelvik 2011). Secreting, hoarding, or preparing food against institutional regulations are common to such struggles (Earle and Phillips 2012; Smoyer 2016a; Smoyer and Lopes 2017). Though prisoner resistance strategies took many forms, the snacking game assigned food practices a central role in conflicts at SSP. In the food factory, workers were forbidden from partaking in the food they prepared, a policy which many regarded as a denial of "perks." Risking expulsion

or demotion, participants pocketed bites of cookies, bread, bologna, and other snacks while on the job, frequently in close proximity to prison staff. Prisoner conspirators monitored the comings and goings of staffers in order to secrete fistfuls of food or hide away items for later. Men from different stations made "hand-offs" to one another—e.g., passing slices of lunch meat in exchange for a baggie of peanut butter. A smiling worker with cheeks full of food was a common sight. The challenge of the game—highlighting an underlying current of resistance—was to direct these smiles at staff.

Given the shortage of nutritious or satisfying food options, fruits and vegetables quickly became targets whenever they appeared in the warehouse. The events of what came to be known as the "blueberry incident" revealed how readily prisoners sought out these foods (and flaunted it to staff), as well as how determined staff members were to protect these less common, more expensive goods. While the warehouse crew stacked boxes of dry foods onto towering metal shelves, a man from the freezer section approached to spread the word that the food factory manager, Dolores, was "already asking who ate the blueberries." Apparently, an order of frozen blueberries had arrived for use in a cake and someone had promptly dipped into the box and devoured several handfuls. Dolores rushed up and down the halls, asking nearby prisoners if they had any information. One man bluntly replied, "I got 12 years in the system and I never *once* saw a blueberry." With a confused expression, Baxter asked, "What the fuck is a blue *berry*?" It was not clear whether or not he was serious.

Leaning on a box of dried beans, Travis shouted down the hallway to Dolores: "Just look for whoever has blue hands! Hahaha, blue fucking *teeth*! That shit stains." Dolores furrowed her brow and disappeared into the meat prep station to conduct more inquiries.

Then, pointing to a few blueberries scattered down the hallway, Travis called out, "Hey! Just follow the trail!" Three or four loose berries were spread along the walkway leading up to the freezer section where they had been held. As we followed the berry trail down the hallway with our eyes, Dean appeared with a push broom, rapidly sweeping them up. As he passed, he flashed a quick smile, revealing a row of blue-stained teeth. Closing his lips in a tight grin, he continued pushing his broom down the hall, taking a sharp turn into the sandwich shop, in the opposite direction of Dolores.

Prisoners of all tenures engaged in these food-centered resistance games. The *rules of the game* were passed down from veterans. For instance, one morning, while his coworkers filed out to lunch, one newcomer remained behind to ask permission to take an extra bag of chips with his meal. "You're not supposed to ask me that!" the staff member shouted. Overseers often remained complicit when prisoners snuck bites of common items like chips or cookies, so long as they retained plausible deniability and workers remained relatively productive. By asking directly for permission to violate the formal rules, however, the novice risked revealing this system. Another prisoner intervened. "You're supposed to *sneak* it," he told the new worker. "Like *this!*" He mimed folding up his orange apron as if concealing a snack underneath. "Oh," came the timid reply, "I just didn't want to break the rules. I don't want a [disciplinary] ticket." Leading the man out to lunch, the veteran instructed him with a paternal tone: "Next time just take it."

The food factory staff members and on-site CO occasionally shared frustrations with one another regarding workers' eating habits; yet, the formal rules prohibiting snacking on the job were only selectively enforced. When one staff member spotted a prisoner stuffing a small stack of cookies into his pockets, she uttered with a shrug, "That's

okay, it isn't *my* station you're stealing from, so." Prisoners were aware of this selective enforcement. According to one man, "They gotta expect we're gonna *eat.* I don't make enough to *buy* food from this job." To be sure, "Sometimes managers *expect* workers to ignore official rules, despite public pronouncements to the contrary" (Lopez 2007: 226). Nevertheless, such violations still represented a form of resistance in that they expressed dissatisfaction with formal regulations and asserted worker agency amidst strict control.

Although they voiced annoyance at prisoner behaviors, staffers recounted that they allowed a small degree of snacking expressly to preclude harsher acts of resistance that might more substantially interfere with production. If a staff member did decide to reprimand a prisoner for snacking, the culprit and his compatriots often responded by engaging in *soldiering* or *goldbricking*—that is, collective foot-dragging to slow down production—or outright *sabotaging* the labor process. When a newly hired manager started tenaciously checking prisoners for extra food before lunch one morning, the entire workforce grew upset. Gloves and other necessary tools and materials began to turn up missing that afternoon, slowing down work considerably. According to a long-time staff member, "These guys—they're used to certain things. … When you take that *away*, they're gonna kick your ass. They're *pissed* and they're gonna rob us blind. They're going to sabotage us. Throw things away." To avoid this, he often "looked the other way" when he spotted workers sampling foods.

A variation on the snacking game was also observed at the prison auto garage. Though this was a skilled labor position, as a *mid-tier* work program at SSP it shared some features with low-tier sites like the food factory. These included a level of pay below that

of top-tier jobs as well as constant surveillance and scrutiny from a permanently on-site correctional officer. Because of the garage's proximity to the food factory, incarcerated workers there often attempted to secure contraband food from contacts next door. The officer stationed within the shop, CO Peña, remained vigilant to workers' snacking attempts; though, like his counterparts in the food factory, he was selective in his enforcement. He allowed auto workers to consume cookies from next door, so long as they were provided directly from a staff member. Unsatisfied workers, however, often attempted to sneak over to the food factory to score larger supplies of different foods from friends at the other site.

One day during a smoke break, a man in orange shouted over from a gated area outside the food factory: "Hey, Larry, here it is!" With a wave, he hurled a plastic trash bag over the 10-foot, razor-wired fence. It landed with a thud in the back of a dump truck parked nearby. Larry, employed as an unskilled car washer at the garage, waved back but left the prize secured in the rear of the truck until he could retrieve it when the correctional officer was away. An hour later, when CO Peña left to perform his regular checks of the surrounding grounds, Larry hurried out to secure his prize, only to find that the dump truck was gone! "Where the *fuck* is the *dump truck!?*" he cried. After he complained to his coworkers about it, we heard the familiar rumble of the vehicle returning. A prison grounds crew worker parked it back near the food factory and Larry and a coworker jogged away towards it. The other working prisoners chuckled at their hustle across the dirt road. The tone changed, however, when CO Peña returned and marched in the direction of the guys. "Oh shit, it's Peña. He sees 'em! He caught 'em," whispered one worker, turning so as not to make eye contact with the officer.

Later, the CO would ask me: "Hey, they didn't ask you to go get food for them, did they?" I shook my head no and he continued. "Been having some trouble with the food factory food. They've been spoiled getting cookies and stuff from over there." Not one to take a scolding lightly, Larry soon emerged to dispute Peña's ruling on the confiscated bag of food:

LARRY: So, what, like, are we just *not* allowed to get any food anymore or *what?*

PEÑA: Look, if you're going to ask again about that, don't waste your breath. It has to stop.

LARRY: It's not *stealing* food. It's extra! It's stuff that's getting thrown away!

PEÑA: It don't matter. You get food from the white shirts [civilian staff members], that's okay. Otherwise, no more. That's it. Okay, that's all!

Larry walked away with a slump and CO Peña shook his head. "One of the *perks* of my job. Sheesh," he sighed. "There's *rules* to be followed. That's my job—to enforce them. If I don't, then why even come to work, you know?" In the coming weeks, Larry would be fired from his position after once again being caught collaborating to smuggle food into the garage.

As prisoners collectively participated in snacking resistance games, looking out for and trading food with one another, they generated discourses regarding work and prison

conditions surrounding these practices. According to worker narratives—which often emerged unprompted by the researcher, typically in response to successful smuggling or consumption—snacking represented resistance to the withholding of perks, bound to more general complaints of despotism and disrespect. "I don't look at it as stealing," one man said, "I look at it as making the pay right." Declarations that "they should pay us more and treat us better" were germane to the game yet revealed deeper resentments on the part of working prisoners. "*We're* human beings *too.* We need to be treated like we're supposed to be treated." Or, as another man said:

> You can make more money just sitting at home [in your bunk] playing cards … but for those of us who are out here trying to improve our lives—out here *working*—we get treated like *shit*. It ain't right. It's supposed to be *corrections!* They're supposed to be teaching us ways to *improve* ourselves for the outside!

Motivated by these concerns, resistance games responded to and fostered collective attitudes of defiance against management and officers whom prisoners deemed unjust or domineering. Through practices like the snacking game, they resisted indignity in oppressive work environments.

Work conditions, the dynamics of the labor process, and worker and managerial practices intertwine to shape patterns of resistance, transforming grievances into collective action (Mulholland 2004). Alongside fiscal hardships (e.g., inadequate pay), prisoners' collective identities were regularly challenged (culminating in feeling "treated like shit").

In the absence of skill training, equitable pay, interesting and engaging work tasks, or regular breaks, workers in low-status positions faced compounded difficulties. Indeed, the majority of overt rule violations or outright challenges to authority that I observed during my time at SSP took place within the less-desirable work sites. They also tended to be related to food. The food factory was the site of daily disturbances and challenges to staff. The auto garage housed fewer incidents overall but was nevertheless plagued with food-related violations. Though men in top-tier work sites faced numerous challenges behind bars, their work environments differed greatly. For the most part, higher-status workers' desired to overtly resist managerial authority appeared supplanted with other agendas.

Professionalism Game

The top spots in the hierarchical prison employment system at SSP were occupied by the prison sign shop and call center—higher paying, skilled work sites in which working prisoners experienced greater degrees of autonomy and input into the labor process, relatively speaking (see Chapter 1 for more detailed descriptions of each). Despite the perks, workers in these sought-after sites nevertheless faced indignities of prison, including regular surveillance, denial of personal space, drudging time, and reduced capacity for self-expression (Goffman 1961; Guilbaud 2010; Sykes 1958). Yet, unlike their counterparts working low- or mid-tier prison jobs, who primarily pursued strategies to tolerate or defy indignity, these men sought to *inject* dignity into their work. That is, they sought to "transform jobs with insufficient meaning into jobs that are more worthy of their personal

stature, time and effort" (Hodson 2001: 45). To help retain skilled penal laborers, overseers encouraged and facilitated their pursuits of dignity. The self-image of 'dedicated worker' was wedded to such activities, to the benefit of productivity levels on the shop floor. Toward these ends, workers in the sign shop and call center engaged in what I call a *professionalism game*. Through strategic rhetoric and practice, they sought to reframe their work program as a "business" or "company" in which they held stake.

Appeals to the normative value of professionalism are common in the world of work. Indeed, a traditional line of questioning in the study of work and occupations asks: "What are the circumstances in which the people in an occupation attempt to turn … themselves into professional people" and "What are the steps by which they attempt to bring about identification with their valued model?" (Hughes [1951] 1994: 59). Feelings of professional competency and value are often privileged (Sharone 2004) and may be drawn on by employers to control the workforce and engender effort (Sallaz 2015). Loyalty may be secured by fostering identity with the worksite or company (Kunda 1992). Workers in turn may seek recognition as professionals (Sallaz 2010), asserting distinction between themselves and others (often those in lower status positions or non-workers) along the lines of competency, morality, and authority (Sherman 2005). Classification as professional bears more status than that of mere worker and professionalism may come to be viewed as a superior value or virtue (Barley and Kunda 2006). The label has rhetorical or moral power that laborers and managers alike may draw on. Indeed, workers often seek professional status (e.g., correctional officers claiming specialized authority in the 19th-Century [Rubin 2018] or hotel workers today leveraging to be regarded as "service professionals" [Sallaz 2010; Sherman 2005]) and many firms or fields contribute to these processes, even in

instances when formal professionalization is not applicable (see Abbott [1988] 2014). Hence, even "mock professionalization" holds value.

Incarcerated workers do not operate within the true professions in that they do not possess formal status, certification, nor control over the knowledge base of their trades (Thompson 2011). Indeed, in the sign shop, much of the workers' trade knowledge was outdated in the field. Nevertheless, the ideal of professional status retained value in the world of prison work, speaking to participants' quests for legitimacy and tied to perceived future work prospects. By self-identifying/framing as professional, prisoners secured self-worth in the present and sought to establish a trajectory for the future. This identity was tied to skill acquisition and a particular outlook which valued work ethic and discipline. The importance of skill building was often stressed, as when one call center worker attested that his job allowed him to "hone a skill that felons can use for work," so that "when I get out, I've got something set up for me." That workers in these positions received higher wages was alleged to reflect the very value of their skills, demonstrating that they could rely on their capabilities for sustenance (Barley and Kunda 2006).

Prisoners engaging in the professionalism game regarded themselves as professionals in their respective fields—pro craftsmen in the sign shop and pro salesmen in the call center. According to Jon, a sign shop worker, the interests of the "business" must take precedent over individual agendas or issues:

> People forget—this *ain't* no [typical prison] job. This is a business.
>
> If you don't like somebody, you gotta set aside your differences.

> You gotta do that for the *company*. When you get back on the yard, *you don't gotta* say hello. But for this business, you gotta set it aside.

Javi expressed similar sentiments when describing the call center: "It feels like a *real job.* A professional atmosphere. … You're representing your *company*." Referring to fellow prisoner salesmen as well as the management, another incarcerated salesman stressed, "We are a team!" Reframed as professionals, men in these work sites regarded the quality of their products or services as central to the "company's success." They, in turn, behaved as beneficiaries of efficiency and profit. In addition to the reward of the often-muted praise of managers (usually a quick grunt and a mumbled "That's good."), these men sought to affirm self-worth and identity through embodying the role of disciplined, dedicated worker (Lamont 2002).

A focal component of the professionalism game at SSP was the espousing of strong "work ethics" for the good of the company. Jon, for instance, asserted that, despite challenges, while at work "I keep a smile on my face. Maintainin' and no complainin'!" Assertions of dedication to quality production were constant. Practically, the game involved training new hires in the proper procedures and expectations of the job, followed by normative self-policing of quality. It was common for participants—especially long-time workers in these sites—to correct others or give "tips" for improving their work in authoritative tones.

Engaging in the professionalism game allowed prisoners a temporary reprieve from prison. "We know we're locked up, but it feels like a business," said Luther of the sign shop. "You feel like you're at a company, in society. Until you hear that [officer's] radio!

But it's peaceful—not like on the yard, in those [housing] bays." In a figurative sense, men playing the professionalism game managed to escape the feelings of confinement and indignities of institutional realities. In addition, it made the prison work experience more bearable, especially in contrast to the "hectic" nature of the prison yard amongst the nonworking prisoners or those from unskilled positions, according to participants.

Many expressed appreciation and even admiration for their jobs: "I never imagined when I got sentenced the opportunity that would have been bestowed on me," one man attested. Such dedication to the work site played a role in prisoner boundary work and distinction processes as well. By asserting the identity of professional, these prisoners sought to distinguish themselves from those in other sites as well as from non-working prisoners. Doing so also helped justify the higher pay and other perks that they received. According to Franklin, "We're professional men. *We* appreciate our job. Not like these 'street thugs.'" Non-working or "undisciplined" prisoners were also referred to as "cell warriors," "neck runners," "goofballs," and "youngsters" (regardless of biological age or institutional tenure). "Most motherfuckers don't wanna work," said one man. "They just want to sit on the yard all day. Fucking *bums*." Older or more educated prisoners sometimes expressed that these others "must *like* prison, or think it's a joke."

The professionalism game was facilitated and in fact encouraged by sign shop and call center management, as well as via the structure of these work sites. In the call center, for instance, regular training sessions helped foster images of professionalism. Each month, a civilian salesman named Maguire entered the prison to instruct prisoners in the techniques and rhetoric of the field. In wingtip shoes and a power tie, he evoked the quintessential image of a professional salesman from film or television. As he spouted sales tips and

lingo, prisoners took feverish notes. "'Going for the no,' as a selling strategy," Maguire instructed one day, "is if I do everything I can and do everything right and they don't say 'no' outright, then I may actually have a sale! Now, the 'law of large numbers' says there's going to be a lot of calls, a lot of sells, a lot of hang-ups—to the point that the phone starts to weigh *300* pounds." After miming holding a great weight in his right hand, he went on: "But if you need to call 100 people to get one sale, how many people do you have to call to get—"

"100 more," Jake blurted, cutting him off. "That's right," Maguire continued. "100 more calls to get the next one. But, following the 'fertile market,' you keep making those calls. You keep going!" Prisoners were energized by these sessions. When I asked the young salesman Marshall his thoughts on training one afternoon, he exclaimed, "It was bad ass! You can tell he's good—he's made a good business out of it." The sales jargon acquired in these meetings—e.g., "going for the no," the "law of large numbers," the "fertile market"—would be noted and later recited by salesmen matter-of-factly when discussing work with one another or coaching new hires in the tricks of the trade. A stack of sales manuals in the office further reinforced this knowledge which was important to the professional image that each sought to craft.

Staff managers also reinforced the idea of the prison call center as "business" or "company," generating enthusiasm among workers. Dennis, the civilian businessman who introduced the call center to the prison and oversaw the work site, did just this in a "company meeting" one morning. Standing in the center of the office, he chastised certain unnamed prisoners for their technique in pursuing payment from customers:

> We need more consistency with how the collectors are going about it. This isn't the wild, wild west. If we got someone who's coming in too aggressive, that person needs to be *gone*. Because that's not consistent with our *company*, with the company that we're trying to build here.

His allusion to firing uncooperative prisoners was linked to advancing the image of the prison work site as a business with incarcerated workers as integral staff involved in building "our company." Prisoners adopted this language, referring to "where we're headed as a company" when discussing concerns or strategies. One civilian staff member, a young man named Eduardo, stated that this type of rhetoric was useful for managing the prisoners under his supervision. While seated at his computer in the "bubble" one day, he explained, "If you treat 'em good, they'll work for you. If you don't make 'em feel like they're in prison, they'll work hard. They come to work to be treated different."

Prisoners enforced the professional demeanor when teaching new hires the ins and outs of the job. Jake, the de facto "inmate manager" of the sales center, tasked with motivating his fellow working prisoners and supervising sales calls, was also involved in introducing new arrivals to the sales process through one-on-one training. Flipping through the pages of the training manual during one such session, he outlined the need for professional behavior:

> The new phones, if they got the volume down right, they won't pick up any background noise. But still, no cursing or dirty jokes in the

> office. Out here [in the yard] is one thing, but in there [at work], act like we're in the real world. Cause we *are*, far as I'm concerned. It's a business, okay.

Sometime later, while training another new recruit, Jake asserted: "When we're in here—[despite] wearing orange—working in a telemarketing place, *we're* telemarketers in our mind."

The professionalism game helped ensure that conflicts or competition remained directed at other prisoners, rather than at managerial or administrative staff—a central feature of work games (Burawoy 1979). At each site, one or multiple informal "inmate managers" was assigned, imposing a hierarchical structure resembling firms in the outside world and helping to further distance the image of the work program from its prison setting while providing a buffer between management and incarcerated laborers. When prisoners clearly demonstrated the outlooks privileged by the professionalism game—such as work ethic, self-discipline, and dedication to the quality of the work—they were openly lauded by their coworkers. For instance, during a particularly slow day in the sign shop with no new orders, Lemmy opted used his spare time to practice his screen-printing skills. Eli, a veteran of the shop, walked over. "This sort of stuff [working during down time], the boss likes seeing this," he said. "He'll remember this when an important job comes through, y'know'mean."

Though they offered praise to others who demonstrated professionalism, working prisoners were also quick to self-police and criticize those who failed to conform. This norm was transferred to new hires early on. When Jon smilingly chided Jimmy for not

properly cleaning off his screen-printing materials, Rogers, a recent sign shop hire still in training, chuckled and added, "Yeah, c'mon, Jimmy!" Jon encouraged him: "My man, Rogers."

Newer workers who were perceived as failing to participate in the game often faced disdain from their coworkers. Working in the sign shop one day I observed as several men discussed concerns about an uncooperative coworker. As we prepared the screen-printing setup for a new run of street signs, Willie came around to collect waste from a nearby hazardous materials bin and, noticing a rag that was supposed to be in a different bin, shook his head and said, "It was probably Alec." Alec had recently joined the sign shop crew but was failing to demonstrate strong work ethic and professionalism to his coworkers. Briskly stirring fresh red ink with a paint stirrer, Lemmy replied:

LEMMY: It probably was. He's lazy, man. Lazy and stubborn—he wants to do it his own way. I saw that from day two.

JON: He's gonna fuck around and get himself asked to not come back.

LEMMY: He's never run a real order too—no 10-sign order. He'll have to conform if he's going to be able to do that.

JON: He *have* to conform.

Much of the derision that Alec faced revolved around the fact that he often spent time drawing while at work, making use of the shop's resources. Although most prisoners occupied themselves with games or other distractions during slow days, Alec had a tendency to seek out any spare moment to do so. His focus on his artwork seemed to generate greater contempt than others faced. Several weeks later, he was indeed fired from the sign shop. When he later secured a position in another popular work program, his former coworkers were surprised but unsupportive. Sammy told me assuredly, "He won't cut it." Lemmy added, "He doesn't want to work! He has absolutely no ambition. It's why he didn't last here."

When men like Alec were fired from top-tier prison work sites, their supposed lack of "discipline" or "dedication" was often mobilized as motivation for other workers. In a different instance, after another uncooperative man had been fired, Eli educated the man's newly-hired replacement about why his predecessor had been let go:

> He would rather talk—he wanted to walk around, talk about women, talk about football. 'Okay,' I told him, 'when you come in here off that bus, you put your hard hat on, holding your lunch pail.' You see, he needs to come in a work mentality. … Good work habits lead to professionalism. I don't care if you breaking rocks or cleaning shitters, developing positive work habits has—hm, how you say it?—it has *dividends*. It'll pay off for you once you're out there looking for work.

The call center was also home to such rhetoric. Turnover there was much higher—several men were let go each month for not reaching quotas, while others often quit after deciding that the high pay was not worth the stress of sales. Quitters were often met with a shake of the head and a disappointed look. After several salesmen quit in one week, Jake attested that "they weren't really in it for the right reasons," i.e., for the good of the company. Eduardo, the civilian staffer, estimated that about half of the current workers demonstrated the characteristics of professionalism, while the other half worked too slowly or failed to demonstrate dedication:

> Half of them are here just for the money. [The other] half of them are here to make their time better and learn to do this work. Those people are going hard. But pretty soon [the boss] is gonna start letting people go.

For many, succeeding at the professionalism game also represented an investment in the future. When release dates neared, prisoners expressed plans to pursue careers in their adopted prison professions. Jake shared his strategy to maintain his current standing in the institution while preparing for the future:

> JAKE: I'm just trying to make myself *invaluable*. I want it to be more of a problem to let me go than to keep me on, you know?
>
> RESEARCHER: It seems like you've already achieved that.

JAKE: And I'm gonna keep it that way. I'm in this for the *long*-term goals. … This is an opportunity that I don't really see anywhere else. They won't really give me a chance anywhere else as a felon, but in *sales* they don't care about that.

The outcomes of the professionalism game were perceived to benefit the incarcerated as well as prison staff. Prisoners attained a degree of status otherwise out of reach behind bars. According to Franklin, sign shop work was more "humanized" than other jobs. More than pay, he expressed that the best thing about the job was the sense of "worth"—"It makes you feel like a regular person." Indeed, because prisoners are denied formal protections such as wage minimums (Thompson 2011), economic measurements of success may be difficult to attain. Instead, participants in the professionalism game established self-worth through forging identities as disciplined, dedicated workers (much like the working-class men studied by Lamont [2002]). And, as these prisoners-as-employees came to extract personal value by approaching the worksite as a business in which they held emotional (if not material) stake, site managers benefited from improved productivity and efficiency.

Discussion: Games, Dignity, & Consent

In Chapter 1, I unpacked the different characteristics that participants at Sunbelt State Penitentiary valued in work sites, outlining an informal, tiered prisoner ranking system comprised of "good," "fine," and "bad" prison jobs. Building on that, this chapter has explored how some of these desired or undesired workplace features facilitated different forms of strategic workplace action, or *work games.* Participants sought to tolerate or defy indignity, or to actively inject dignity into their work and prison lives by drawing on various collective practices shaped in part by the allowances or limitations of each site. Work is central to assessments and assertions of self-worth (Hodson 2001; Lamont 2002) and work games were an integral feature of working prisoners' pursuit of dignity.

All prisoners, regardless of work status or position, are subject to the mortification processes of prison life (Goffman 1961) and some degree of indignity at the workplace (Hodson 2001). Each SSP prisoner was stripped of resources and autonomy with limited opportunities for identity expression. All, too, were exposed to surveillance and authoritative control, albeit at different rates of frequency. Even the highest paid prisoner made only a fraction of federal minimum wage and none received basic worker protections like workers' compensation. As such, all prison work crews developed some form of *coping game* aimed at *tolerating* the negative features of penal labor and extracting some enjoyment, however brief, from the work day. Often, these entailed turning the labor process itself into some sort of competition, such as food factory "meat races" or call center sales competitions.

In addition to the general rigors of the prison experience, many participants were employed in "bad prison jobs" like the food factory, in which many of the above challenges were exacerbated by strict control over the labor processes, overbearing surveillance and scrutiny, arbitrary expressions of managerial authority, heavily restricted movement, deskilling, lower pay, and other undesirable features. The lack of autonomy and input that these workers experienced reflects despotic forms of labor control of the early 20th-Century (Burawoy 1985). Coupled with other prison-specific features that amplify many despotic features—and housed within this institution in which many of the political advances of labor have not taken hold—these workplaces may be framed as sites of a particular form of despotic regime: "carceral labor despotism."

Table 4. Prison Work Games

	Work Sites Where Played	***Labor Process Context***	***Objective of Game***	***Approach to Indignity***
Coping Game	All sites	Varied	Seek distraction from rigors of prison and work life	Tolerate indignity
Resistance Game	Low-tier, mid-tier	Carceral labor despotism	Push back against arbitrary authority and surveillance	Defy indignity
Professionalism Game	Mid-tier, upper-tier	Carceral labor hegemony	Reframe work program as "business," prisoner as professional	Reinject dignity

Responding to and limited by the structure and management of these sites, these men engaged in *resistance games*. Players of these games *defied* indignity by actively and strategically flouting workplace regulations that they deemed unjust. Resistance games could also be observed in some mid-tier prison work sites, as was the case in the auto garage, which shared certain characteristics with the food factory, including the constant

presence of a correctional officer and the ensuing heavy surveillance and frequent expressions of institutional authority. In defiance of regulations deemed unreasonable, the men of both sites turned sneaking snacks into an act of resistance and expression of autonomy—drawing on "prison foodways" to assert agency (Smoyer 2016b).

At the other end of the prison work hierarchy, desirable work programs—or, "good prison jobs"—offered relatively greater autonomy and freedom of movement, input into the labor process, and skilled, engaging work tasks. The call center and sign shop, the most highly regarded positions in the institution, were each managed by civilian staff members and, although the possibility of a random sweep was always possible, neither had a correctional officer regularly stationed inside the workplace. These factors made for work environments that participants described as typically more "relaxed" and "like a real job," in which they could escape prison "in their mind." In terms of labor process, these sites could be said to resemble more "hegemonic" regimes in action (Burawoy 1985). Although these incarcerated workers lacked the formalized bargaining protections that defined the hegemonic regimes of monopoly capitalism, nor did they benefit from any greater protections than their counterparts in more despotically-managed sites, they were nevertheless allowed greater degrees of autonomy and input by their civilian overseers. That is, shop-floor compromises remained prevalent. As above, however, many workplace features were indeed prison-specific, reflecting a special form of "carceral labor hegemony."

Rather than merely tolerate or defy indignity, the men here were free to attempt to *reinject* some dignity into their daily lives through the playing of a *professionalism game*. Participants sought to reframe their workplaces as a "company" or "business" and

themselves as professional employees. They self-policed one another's "work ethics" and sought to distinguish themselves from non-working prisoners or those in unskilled or undesirable positions, whom they deemed less dedicated or professional.

These games represent expressions of worker agency in the face of indignity, molded by the limitations and allowances of each respective site. As with games in free world workplaces, however, prisoner work games did not only reward the workers. Prison administrators and work site management dictated the overarching policies with which prisoners had little choice but to comply, in effect establishing the rules of the games. By selectively enforcing these policies and encouraging particular forms of game play, institutional actors drew on prison work games to further the productive or service goals of each site and manage the working prisoner population. Although prisons may compel the incarcerated to work as a facet of punishment (following the 13th Amendment), these practices helped ensure that prisoners continued to work *hard.*

Through coping games, workers discerned ways to make work more engaging, tolerating the undignified nature of disagreeable tasks or despotic oversight; yet, many of these games rewarded efficient production or service. Meat races and sales competitions, for instance, encouraged prisoners to increase productivity in the food factory and call center, respectively. Benefiting from this, work site overseers facilitated such games. Similarly, prisoner resistance games allowed participants to actively defy institutional regulations. Through the snacking game, prisoners helped one another smuggle and secrete small stashes of food—often flaunting it to staff members—despite formal rules restricting consumption. Managers often turned the other way in the face of this game, however, allowing prisoners this particular outlet (while maintaining the authority to impose

restrictions as desired) in place of more obstructive forms of resistance like sabotage. Finally, through the professionalism game, prisoners reframed the prison work site as a "business" and themselves as "professional workers" within it. Benefiting from increased efficiency and quality resulting from this game, management encouraged it by themselves referring to the workplace and workers in the same terms, reinforcing these outlooks through regular training sessions.

In various work sites, management appointed informal "inmate managers" to help handle work crews. It is notable that the two examples of this discussed above—Slick, who managed the meat prep crews in the food factory, and Jake, who oversaw the sales crew in the call center—were heavily involved in the work games of these programs. Though they held no formal authority, these de facto managers also functioned to buffer actual prison staff from incarcerated workers in the event of grievances. When concerns, complaints, or confusions emerged, participants commonly turned to Slick and Jake, who often approached the bosses on workers' behalf.

Participation in social games inherently represents consent to the conditions surrounding their play and serves to reproduce their underlying structures (Bourdieu 1990; Burawoy 1979). Because games in prison must be played within the bounds of rules set by management, institutional administrators, and penal policymakers, engaging in prison work games entails the reification of the broader structures of carceral labor as well as the local prison employment system. Such games dampen direct forms of worker resistance to labor exploitation while transforming conflicts between workers and management into competition between workers and one another. At Sunbelt State Penitentiary, the

professionalism game in particular served to reproduce divisions between prisoner groups, advancing a wedge between populations already divided along the lines of race and nationality (Walker 2016), further limiting the possibilities of collective action. Through this game, prisoners enacted distinction processes and boundary maintenance, reframing themselves as professionals, but also reframing others as undeserving or unmotivated. Franklin illustrated this when he said, "There are some of us—the more mature men—we *want* to work. We don't want the drama of the yard. It gives you something to do, gives you integrity. That's what we strive for." In claiming dignity in this way, participants denied it to others, assuming that they "want" drama over integrity. And, through these rhetorics, workers in fact reified the structures which relegated them into punitive labor. That is, by espousing the belief that some—other—prisoners were lacking in work ethic or discipline and that it was these shortcomings which explained their lower positions in the employment system, participants in the professionalism game espoused the very outlooks which are often drawn on to justify the use of punitive labor in the first place. Furthermore, by adopting this lens, workers in top-tier positions misrecognized the work skills and resources with which they entered the employment system—the very capitals which enabled them to secure their increased status in the hierarchical prison labor market (see Chapter 2)—as drive, work ethic, and professionalism.[16]

The process and reward structures of prison work games may have implications for the purported rehabilitative capacities (e.g., Pryor 2005) of penal labor. Workers playing the professionalism game may possess or develop positive outlooks towards work as their prison labor assignments offer reprieve from the drama and stress of the yard and less desirable work assignments. However, the opposite may be true for workers in sites which

foster work resistance games. The conditions or labor processes of low-tier positions may make it difficult to play "professional." Instead of an escape, work here is understood as another facet of punishment against which prisoners struggle. Workers in turn risk developing negative outlooks towards work as they grapple, often hopelessly, to acquire sufficient wages for sustenance, develop work skills, or find meaning in labor.

Institutions cultivate and reward certain dispositions which benefit them (Bourdieu 1996). Chapter 2 examined how the penal institution sorts and sieves workers with marketable skills or resources into desirable jobs. In the current chapter, I have unpacked another process through which this occurs—via the reproduction of boundaries stratifying prisoner groups and through the generation of consent through work games. In the next chapter, I turn toward another set of outcomes of this institutional sieve for the reproduction of inequality between prisoners. As I will illustrate, the imbalanced nature of the prison employment system has significant formal and informal economic effects for prisoners and their families. And, in the context of pay disparities and limited access to formal and informal prison markets, the outcomes of labor stratification in prison has notable implications for how these men prepare for release.

CHAPTER 4

I Owe My Soul to the Commissary Store:

Labor Stratification Outcomes on the Inside

> Money…was of terribly great importance and power in prison. I can say positively that a convict who had at least some money in hard labor suffered ten times less than one who did not have any.
>
> – Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from a Dead House*

Research into the impacts of incarceration for individual prisoners, families, and communities highlights myriad negative outcomes of doing time. From reduced job search prospects (Freeman 1992; Holzer 2009; Pager et al. 2009; Western and Beckett 1999) to slashed earnings (Pettit and Lyons 2009; Sutton 2002; Western 2002), volatile family formation and instability (Apel et al. 2010; Comfort 2008; Edin 2001; Lopoo and Western 2005; Western and Wildeman 2009) to stifled civic engagement (Manza and Uggen 2006), and a variety of physical and mental health challenges (Massoglia 2008; Patterson 2010; Schnittker and John 2007; Spaulding et al. 2011), scholars across decades have documented widespread negative effects of imprisonment. Some have even examined the effects of access to skilled labor programming while behind bars in shaping prospects after release (Seiter and Kadela 2003; Travis and Vischer 2005). For many of the incarcerated, however, prison sentences are long and grueling, with reentry a distant thought. Amongst the men of Sunbelt State Penitentiary, numerous participants had many years left ahead of

them. Some were serving second, third, or fourth sentences. Whether returning to prison for the commission of a new crime, or upon violation of probation or parole following a prior release, many had spent more time behind bars than outside them over recent decades. For these men and others, the conditions *behind bars* were pressing concerns that often eclipsed planning for their lives outside.

With this in mind, the final empirical chapter of my dissertation examines economic outcomes of penal labor stratification on the inside. It unpacks prisoner wage disparities—which find some men earning approximately $0.05 hourly while others earn over $1.00—and how this pay gap differentially shapes the lives of the incarcerated. In other words, it explores the material outcomes of the penal labor sorting and sieving process. It unpacks how labor market outcomes impact carceral experiences in terms of access to goods and services (moving beyond the implications of labor stratification for prisoner agency and the pursuit of dignity discussed in the previous chapter). As cost-shifting practices continue to expand behind bars (e.g., Levenson and Gordon 2007), prisoners themselves have grown more reliant on wages to supplement core prison services through formal or informal markets.

The *formal prison economy* refers to the institutional outlets where prisoners spend their wages. Here, they may purchase commissary items, medical services, and mail or telephone access. A prisoner's job and rate of pay often determines their ability to purchase vital foods and hygiene products, "nonessential" entertainment goods, and even access to doctor visits. The incarcerated have limited access to consumer goods and various services. Like the company stores of some isolated mining towns in the early 20th-Century (Green 2010), the prison commissary represents the only store where working prisoners can spend

their hard-earned wages. Prisoners' families may also be impacted by these disparities as wages are also necessary to afford access to the telephone and mail services facilitating communication with family and support networks in the free world. In addition, the quality of a prison work assignment can shape outcomes in the *informal prison economy*. In this illicit marketplace, prisoners able to acquire ramen noodles—the de facto informal currency in today's prison (Gibson-Light 2018)—can purchase smuggled fruits and vegetables or other goods not available through formal channels, as well as black market services provided by other prisoners, including laundry, bunk cleaning, clothing or personal belonging repairs and maintenance, private security details, and more.

Prisoners at SSP faced imbalanced exposure to risk as a result of pay disparities. Those who were less able to afford necessary goods in the formal or informal market could be driven to provide illicit services in the underground economy or pilfer goods in order to make money through shadow labor. Lacking sufficient wages to spend on commissary, many were also driven to purchase goods from informal "inmate stores," which were prohibited by DOC policy. By purchasing or possessing black market goods or by providing illicit services, these individuals risked additional exposure to the security apparatus of the prison, which sought to curb prisoner engagement in such activities. If caught, these men risked additional prison time, relocation to a higher security facility, or other sanctions.

Another Day, Another Dollar: Prisoner Pay

Pay for penal labor was distributed via an institutional pay system sometimes referred to as an "inmate checking account." To have funds in one's account was to "have money on the books" that could only be used in the formal prison economy. Most prisoners at SSP started their carceral labor careers at around $0.05 per hour. The standard maximum pay cap was approximately $0.50. Three positions were made exceptions to this cap: the outside work crews, which paid a flat $0.50 hourly, the sign shop, which paid between $0.50 to $1.00, and the call center, which paid upwards of $1.00 per hour. At the national level, the meager wages that these men received are in fact relatively high. In states where prisoners are paid for their labors, wages may vary from under $0.05 to over $5.00 per hour (Sawyer 2017).[17]

In most positions at SSP, workers were eligible for a pay raise every six months, following a performance evaluation. They may be graded an E for "exceeds expectations," S for "satisfactory," U for "unsatisfactory," or N for "no rating." Prisoners received no rating for failure to attend mandatory work assignments. Typically, failure to attend brought additional sanctions, such as disciplinary tickets or termination.

No money, more problems: Prisoners' economic concerns

In general, wages of any amount are important for navigating a prison sentence. As Alexey stated matter-of-factly, "You *need* money in prison." A small subset of participants reported receiving regular financial assistance from family or friends in the free world. For

instance, Jim, a middle-aged prisoner working in the food factory warehouse department, shared that his mother put money on his books each month. With this steady source of income from the outside, he had little problem making ends meet during his prison stay. Few of his incarcerated counterparts could claim similar support, however. Jim was cognizant of the advantages that he had. "I'm a *rare* inmate," he told me. "I don't need to work—I don't need to do *anything*. I just do this [work] to pass the time."

Jim's situation was indeed rare. According to Eli, "Jobs are important in here because money is scarce. A lot of people don't have family on the outside supporting them." To be sure, the incarcerated are disproportionately drawn from the poor (Wakefield and Uggen 2010) and external support was far from guaranteed for the overwhelming majority. As such, wages from penal labor were vital for most to afford basic wants and needs behind bars. It was often repeated that these wages were necessary to get through a prison sentence. One man outlined the potential severity of the issue: "If you don't have [commissary money], you go hungry." For the lowest paid workers at SSP, a full day's work yielded just enough to purchase one pack of ramen from the commissary. One man, Stahl, was even more graphic about financial conditions and the need to labor: "If you're on that yard [not working], you're gonna *starve*."

The state of prisoner pay was a common source of anxiety. When asked about his experiences with carceral labor more broadly, Rich quickly brought up his wages. "Of course, I'm not happy about the pay," he uttered. "If anything, I barely get by. I'm not talking about *wants*; I'm talking about *needs*! I'm completely on my own in here and it's not enough." The fact that work was mandated only made issues worse. "Not only are we

forced to work," proffered one food factory meat roller, "but if we *don't* work, we get punished. It's a sweatshop! A full day's work might [pay enough to] get you a *soup*."

Sometimes, frustrations over wages begat conflict. One day, I witnessed a brief quarrel between two food prep workers and a civilian staff member. The staffer threatened to fire one of the men, nicknamed Solar, for sitting down for too long. Solar's coworker chimed in, "You know we get paid less than slaves?" The staff member seemed taken aback. "That's not even true. They only worked for food," he said. With eyebrows raised, the prisoner retorted, "Well, we don't even get food!" A grin appeared on Solar's face and he produced a torn piece of cardboard from a nearby trashcan and quickly scrawled something on it. He clutched his creation, a cardboard panhandling sign, between outstretched fists. It read:

Please Help

Homeless & Broke

Will Work

For Food

The staff member read his sign and waved him off: "Yeah, yeah." The men laughed, and the tension was dispelled for the moment, but frustrations over pay and meals remained unaddressed.

The highest paid prisoners—those working in the sign shop and call center—had notably different experiences with money. Others often referred to them as "prison CEOs" for the very evident disparity in pay from which they benefitted. "The assumption on the

yard is that call center workers are rich," stated one incarcerated salesman. "In here, we're the lucky ones," said Jake. "We're rich in here compared to everyone else. [Over one dollar] an hour might as *well* be CEOs in here. I don't know why they don't have more jobs like this." Amidst a scarcity of higher-paying jobs, a notable pay disparity persisted between the lowest and highest-paid SSP prisoners. As a result, the abilities of these men to purchase essential goods and services often varied drastically depending on their standing in the penal labor hierarchy. In what follows, I outline some of these material disparities as they emerged in both the formal and informal prison economies.

The Formal Prison Economy

Few items or services were provided without charge to the incarcerated. The contemporary state prison like SSP—though regarded as a public institution—is home to numerous private firms that operate things like the commissary store, the kitchens, medical care, telephone services, and more. As such, prisoners were required to pay from their institutional accounts if they wished to benefit from most of these offerings.

Prison purchases and the commissary store

The commissary store was the main site of prisoner spending. Estimates suggest that commissary sales nationwide amount to over $1.6 billion annually (Raher 2016); more recent examinations suggest that this industry may be even higher-grossing than this.

According to one study, sampled prisoners spent *more* in the commissary than they typically earned through prison jobs; most of those purchases were for food or hygiene products (Raher 2018).

At SSP, Wednesday was "commissary day," the day when individuals could pick up the items that they had ordered the previous week. For most behind bars, commissary day represented the highlight of the week. Even the most morose participants of my study were likely to perk up when it came time to pick up their goods. While crossing the yard one day, for instance, I spotted ten familiar faces from the sign shop. They were arranged in a loosely structured line leading up to an open door and small window. Several of the men waved as I approached. Felix pointed excitedly to the commissary and gave me a thumbs up. Lemmy, the self-described "Mr. Negative" of the crew, even offered a slight smile toward the open door. He was next in line.

Inside of the small, stark white room the walls were lined with metal shelving units crowded with clear plastic trash bags filled with varieties of ramen, chips, toothpaste, and other goods. Some bulged with items; others appeared deflated, holding few goods. Each bag was labeled with the name of a different prisoner. A plain-clothes staff member that worked for the private firm running the store leaned on a counter, closely inspecting a slip of paper that one prisoner, Denaun from the sign shop, had just handed her. Without fully turning her head, she called out his last name to her assistant, a tall prisoner adorned in a long-sleeve orange shirt with neck tattoos creeping up from the collar. The man quickly spun on one foot, scanned the shelves, and pulled one of the larger bags, with Denaun's name on it. Before leaving, Denaun inspected its contents through the transparent plastic, pushing things aside to count each item. With a satisfied smile, he told me, "Got all my

stuff this week." When he exited, Lemmy entered and said, "What's up." After handing over his slip and receiving his large bag, he glanced inside (with much less intent than Denaun) and nodded. Hiking it up on his shoulder, victorious, he exclaimed to me, "*This* is what we work for!" As he marched out, Sammy entered next, grinning upon site of the bag-lined shelves.

Most commissary bags were filled primarily with food items. According to prisoners and correctional staff alike, the food provided by the state in the chow line was not enough on its own to sustain an adult. Regular complaints contended that the meals contained too many starches, too little protein, and shrinking portion sizes. As one food factory worker put it, "The chow is really bad. They give you little kid meals, like *that's* enough calories for a grown man." DS, who had once worked as a server on the chow line for some time, reported that, "The white shirts [staffers] encourage you to stay low on portions—it's not enough for a man to eat." To supplement these sparse offerings, men relied on food available through the commissary. A man's financial standing could often be assessed by what he ate for lunch: purely state chow or commissary offerings. During lunch in the sign shop one day, Clegg added some chips that he had purchased in the commissary to the inside of his state-provided bologna sandwich in order to fill it up. As he brought it to his mouth he uttered, "You pretty much—if you don't have store [commissary credit], you go hungry." Snorting, his coworker, the young Bryson, added: "Or you learn to love *bread*." Figure 7 depicts a state lunch from one particularly generous day (when cheese was provided).

Figure 7. A state-provided "bag nasty" with extra cheese added (author photo)

Those who could afford to do so often declined state-provided lunches altogether, relying entirely on commissary purchases. Jimmy, for instance, had concocted what he called the "perfect lunch" in terms of price as well as calorie and protein intake: prison quesadillas. Each lunch break in the sign shop, he could be found setting up his items meticulously beside the microwave. In a small bowl, he mixed a portion of powdered refried beans in water and microwaved them. The bean mix was spread in a thick layer onto a single flour tortilla, which was then topped with a zig-zag squeeze from a packet of spicy cheese spread and folded in half. In total, Jimmy assessed his lunch at $0.49 per meal—$1.45 for a bag of powdered beans, which made seven servings at $0.21 each; $0.30 for a packet of jalapeno squeeze cheese, which provided two servings at $0.15 each; and a pack of six tortillas for $0.78 or $0.13 each. Securing one's own sustenance in the face of deprivation was easier from a higher-paying, desirable job. With his above-average hourly wage from the sign shop, Jimmy assured me that he could afford these supplies and still have enough left to purchase other items for dinner and necessary hygiene products, even accounting for the deducted prison fees each pay period. "In order for us to eat healthy,

you have to have a job. Otherwise, it's *not* good," one man said. As another put it, "These [higher paying] jobs are the only ones where you can *survive* in here—you can afford food and hygiene. Otherwise you're relying on the *state*."

In addition to food, the incarcerated could acquire a variety of other goods from the commissary. Necessary hygiene products like toilet paper or denture cream were not generally provided but could be purchased. Expensive entertainment goods, such as portable CD players or televisions (with transparent plastic casing), were also available, but were prohibitively expensive for most at $40 and $195 respectively. In addition to the commissary cost, possession of electronic appliances like this also brought with it a $2.00 monthly electricity fee for the incarcerated. Only those with steady incomes could afford such luxuries behind bars.

Clothing items were especially popular in the store. While the state provided newly admitted prisoners with a set of orange shirts, pants, undergarments, and flimsy boots upon admission, the men of SSP were standardly expected to purchase their own replacements or upgrades as needed. This was a source of frustration for many, especially those in low-paying jobs. According to the aging Samuél, when I first met him in the food factory, "We ruin our clothes working, but yet they won't replace 'em and we can't afford new ones." Indeed, the conditions of many prison jobs did result in clothing being quickly worn down. Many a warehouse worker sported stained orange sweatshirts with tattered sleeves or bits of old fabric hanging down like fringe. Working in the food factory one day, Dean pulled me aside and said, "Hey, hey, check this out." Lifting his left foot, he revealed that the sole of his state-issued boot had nearly peeled fully off. He kicked his foot slightly and the hanging sole flapped like a gaping mouth. Unable to afford new, sturdier boots, he had

been stuck with these ones for some time. With an exaggerated shrug he pointed down and sighed, "I mean, *really?*"

Often, even when prisoners could afford new items, supplies of new goods were quickly depleted, leaving only used goods, if any. Jon expressed frustrations at work one day after being unable to purchase a new pair of underwear. He told his coworkers that the only thing available to him, according to the commissary store clerk, were used "shitty drawers." Visibly upset at being denied unused products, he shouted, "Where's the money goin'? The tax money that's s'posed to be paying for [necessities like] these clothes—where's *that* goin'??"

Formal prison services

In addition to purchasing goods from the prison commissary, the men of SSP were also expected to pay for numerous services available to them. Chief among these was the mandatory fee for visiting the doctor's office. Most states charge prisoners these medical fees; the national average is $3.47 per visit (Schwartzapfel 2018). Visiting the doctor at SSP cost $4.00. To many, this cost was unacceptable, especially in light of other expenses, such as food. Recall, for instance, when one prisoner chastised another for paying for a doctor visit instead of purchasing burrito ingredients (in Chapter 3): "We could be *eatin'*, but you blew it on the doc. Don't be goin' to the doctor."

Throughout the prison, the quality of medical care was infamous. When discussing the services available in the institution, one correctional officer overseeing a housing run declared, "The company that does the medical is—" he paused for a moment and shook his

head before continuing with emphasis, "*bad.*" A group of nearby prisoners affirmed almost in unison: "Yup." For prisoners in poor health, or with more serious conditions or injuries, this was particularly troubling. After missing a day of work in the food factory, the sturdy Armando stomped off the bus the next morning clutching his hand. One of his fingernails was completely blackened, the result of a heavy metal meat pan falling on it during his last work shift. While setting up his work station, he told me that his entire arm was terribly sore the night of the accident, resulting in a restless night. He overslept the next morning, missed the bus to work, and was put on formal report for failure to appear. Although his injury was still painful, he said that he could not afford to visit the doctor. "Four dollars is half my check for fifteen days," he said. Plus, he continued, "They don't do nothing anyways. The only thing they do is they say to us, 'Drink a lot of water,' and that's it."

The white-haired Samuél, shared a related experience. Clutching his back one afternoon between rounds of dishwashing, he shared that he suffered from "chronic back pain." Water dripped down the front of his red rubber dish apron as he stretched weakly. Before prison, he received disability benefits. Inside, however, he was required to work and risked disciplinary tickets if he skipped a day to rest his body. After his last four-dollar doctor's visit, he was prescribed Advil, which he had to purchase from the commissary. At less than $0.50 per hour, he often struggled to afford the painkiller and expressed that he had no plans to scrape together the money for another examination. Men who were required to make recurring or follow-up visits were often still charged the fee. As one man complained:

> They got me listed down in *Chronic Care* and everything else. But then they call [me for] my medical, they charge me four dollars! So, you figure you get twenty cents an hour—that's six dollars a week? You know what I mean? But then they take that out… What do you have left, if you have anything left?

Another service that prisoners must pay for was the use of telephones to call home. Over time, the prices of use had increased steadily, as has become the norm in U.S. penal facilities (Jackson 2007). At SSP, prisoners were charged over $0.10 per minute to make local calls through the contracted phone services provider. This price nearly doubled for long-distance calls. Although the FCC has capped the rate that prisoners can be charged for out-of-state calls, they still remain prohibitively costly for the poor (Sawyer 2019). The money amassed from these charges was said to go toward the development and support of new prison programming. "But," claimed Maurice, "nobody ever sees that money" and more programs seemed to have been cut than introduced in recent years. Still, as the primary means of maintaining contact with family and others in the free world, the phones saw constant use. Every time I visited the yard, I observed a tight cluster of men standing around each wall-mounted phone or lined up in a row beside it, waiting for their turn.

Telephone access was often leveraged as a means of disciplining the prisoner population. If a prisoner received enough infractions, they would often have phone privileges revoked as one of their first sanctions. This authority was often wielded arbitrarily, according to the incarcerated. One man recounted getting punished for stepping

his foot too far onto a yellow boundary line painted around the periphery of the recreational yard: "You have one *foot* over that thing … *Bam*, you get a ticket. They take your store away for two weeks. No phone calls, no nothing—for *that*." This sanction could put strain on personal relationships. The man continued:

> I mean, that's two weeks not calling your wife or your girlfriend. Imagine if you just got cut off? Your cell phone, your family, your work, everything, for two weeks. And then you're waiting, like, 'Damn, man, I've got five more days. Four more days left.' And then when you [finally] call, it's just like they just took two weeks of your freedom. … Your outside life.

For some, the maintenance of this "outside life" through the payphones was a primary motivation to work. According to one food factory worker, his wages, though minimal, helped him access the phones during periods when his mother was unable to help him financially. "I wanted a job *quick* because I don't have any outside money. My mom wasn't helping me. After a couple months she started putting money on my books. I'd buy phone time with it mostly." Prisoners in higher-paying positions were better able to afford "putting money on their phones." According to one call center salesman, one of the biggest perks of his higher pay cap was:

> Being able to put money on the phone *ourselves* so that they [family] don't have to pay for it. You know what I mean? I remember whenever I first put money on the phone and my old lady [girlfriend] answered, and [the recording] said, 'You have a call at no expense to you.' She felt *tripped*. 'What the hell? I ain't paying for this?' And this makes them feel good.

Telephone access was especially critical for men approaching release. They relied on this access in order to arrange housing and other amenities after prison. It was important to schedule transportation as well. "I mean we *need* to make phone calls," one man shared during the weeks leading up to his freedom. "Like, I'm 30 days to the gate [to release] and I need to get some things lined up, and if I don't have that… They're going to drop me off at a bus station."

Savings and preparations

In addition to making reentry plans and preparations via the phones, the potential to save wages was also vital in the lead-up to release. For some, these concerns started early. Franklin told me matter-of-factly that, "Once you've got two years left, that's important [the pay]." For most, setting funds aside was difficult at best. Seth, working in the fleet auto garage, expressed frustrations to this end. To him, willingly participating in work was something that ought to be rewarded. Instead, he said, "They don't make it easy

for us in here. I mean, I know it's not s'posed to be [easy], but the guys out there doing jobs that they *would* have to pay ten, twenty dollars an hour for? They could at *least* pay us a [full] *dollar* an hour so we can get by—actually have some money to get started when we're released."

Some prisoners, however, were better able to amass savings. Those able to avoid spending all of their earnings—that is, the rare few with the highest-paying jobs—sometimes framed their penal labor assignments as a means of preparing for reentry. The prison call center, as the highest-paying work site, was home to many workers with this in mind. When asked about the qualities of the job, the newly-hired Rico said, "The pay's alright. I'm doing it for my old lady. To have something for when I get out." The sign shop was the other such position. On the day of my interview with Ocho, who had worked in the shop for 22 months, he was excited about his imminent return home in 30 days (referred to as "29 and a wakeup"). "I have over fifteen-hundred [saved] in my fund," he shared with enthusiasm. "It'll help me get on my feet." Despite his ability to amass this amount, he remained cognizant of the percentages that the institution had garnished from his checks each week. "I did the math on my pay. They took over 891 *dollars* from me for room and board. And they *still* charged me two dollars for electricity!" With a sideways glance and a chuckle, he added: "The bastards."

The highest-paid men even reported sending remittances home, allowing them to maintain a form of "breadwinner" status and thereby preserve some degree of household "normalcy" (e.g., Anderson 2017) to which they might return after incarceration. According to Clay, a call center worker, "We've got our families out there. Still have mortgages. Still have car payments. … So, having that money [means] being able to send

it out to buy our kids school supplies or Christmas presents, maybe help with the mortgage each month."

The Informal Prison Economy

While the formal prison economy was organized around prisoner wages through "inmate checking accounts," the informal market relied on its own currency. Informal monies operate outside of standard systems of exchange (Zelizer 2001) and may develop alongside or in place of formal cash or other currency (Carruthers 2005). They are typically relegated to constrained "circuits of commerce"—i.e., bounded economic spheres with shared understandings of value and money (Zelizer 2010). A prison monetary token in particular is typically "a durable, portable, and highly demanded commodity that can be comparatively easily obtained" (Karpova 2013: 15) and which is reducible to a common scale (Gray 2001; Reed 2007). Though relegated to limited markets, these goods are nevertheless treated as currency—as "the prison equivalent of cash providing exchange for goods (such as food and drugs) and to pay debts" (Richmond et al. 2009: 178) or to compensate fellow prisoners for services like personal laundry or cleaning (Lankenau 2001). An item that seems commonplace in the "free world" may thus take on a new life within prison as "a high value good…because it is a ticket to the black market. Each of these goods can be sold, traded and gambled because each item is inherently money" (Karpova 2013: 4).

The de facto informal currency of choice in today's prisons is cheap, durable foods like packets of ramen noodles. Denied nutritious or filling food through the chow hall (Gottschalk 2006) and expected to supplement the costs of food and other services involuntarily consumed (Aviram 2015), contemporary prisoners have adopted a form of currency reflecting the politics of consumption that have grown increasingly salient amidst tensions with the authorities. Food practices and meanings, or "foodways," represent a key platform through which prisoners may reclaim control over daily routines and resist deprivations (Smoyer 2016a). The seemingly mundane effort to control what and when one eats actively defies penal structures which otherwise repress prisoner identities and agency (Ugelvik 2011). "Choices of any kind around food," says Camplin (2017), "re-appropriate selfhood for inmates" (57). Eating ramen—in contrast to state-provided chow—provides an opportunity to "defin[e] one's self" in the face of strict limitations (Camplin 2017; Godderis 2006). Having risen to the role of currency behind bars, the ramen soup packet derives worth in part from its role as an expressive good or "ritual supply" (Goffman 1961) that maps on to prisoner struggles and evolving insecurities. (For an examination of the transition from tobacco products to ramen as the leading prison currency, see Gibson-Light [2018].)

The structure of the prison ramen market and 'inmate stores'

During my first several months of fieldwork at SSP, I heard many references to "soups" (i.e., ramen) used as payment in the underground economy. Participants paid for different goods (e.g., smuggled vegetables, toothpaste) and services (e.g., bunk cleaning,

laundry), or gambled using ramen soups. A single packet cost $0.59 through the prison commissary and even those who did not eat the salty treat regularly stocked up for use as currency. On one visit to the prison housing unit, I observed as one prisoner approached another's bunk to collect on a debt. "You got what you owe me?" he asked casually. "On the counter there," replied the second man, gesturing toward two packets of ramen noodles. A nearby correctional officer appeared not to register the exchange. I asked other prisoners and staff members about informal economic practices at SSP. In many accounts across several months, all prisoners reported using ramen to pay for goods or services from other prisoners, with many stating that they primarily purchased essential goods like other food or denture cream with ramen via the black market. News reports affirm that other prisoner populations across the nation have adopted ramen or other food products as a primary unit of exchange in recent years (Collins and Alvarez 2015; Harwell 2010; NPR Staff 2015; Paynter 2011; Scheck 2008; Yglesias 2008).

"Soup is money in here. It's sad but true," said one man. According to Alec, "Ramen is the best money in here because it can be traded for anything else. I can go next door and trade ramen for a bag of coffee or whatever." As another participant asserted, "you can get a lot with soups." Another went further to state that "a soup is everything" and many will trade anything they own to get one. He explained:

> It's 'cause people are hungry. You can tell how good a man's doing [financially] by how many soups he's got in his locker. '20 soups? Oh, that guy's doing good!' … People will pay more for an envelope when they need to write home to get

> more soups! Prison is like the streets—you use currency for everything. In here, it's soups.

Soups represent an ideal medium of exchange in the prison context for several reasons. They are inherently valuable as affordable, easily-prepared "hunger killers" (Errington et al. 2012), while also exhibiting certain characteristics of money. A ramen packet, like a dollar bill, stores value over long periods of time, can operate as a standardized unit of account, and can be readily exchanged between parties (see Asmundson and Oner 2012; Ingham 1996).

Table 5. Prices in the SSP Prison Ramen Black Market

Good to be Traded	Commissary Price (in dollars)	Black Market Price (in ramen packs)	Black Market Price in Dollars (packs x $0.59)
Ramen instant noodle pack	0.59	1	0.59
Fresh fruit or vegetable	unavailable in commissary	1 or 2 (by type)	0.59 or 1.18
Pouch of coffee	5.47	4	2.36
Loose tobacco	3.13 or 4.29 (by brand)	6	3.54
Five "tailor-made" cigarettes	2.00 (approximately)	1	0.59
Envelope	0.02	1	0.59
Thermals (top and bottom)	11.30	6	3.54
Sweatshirt	10.81	2	1.18
Denture adhesive	2.57	1	0.59

Table 5 depicts black market and commissary costs of several popular goods at SSP. Commissary prices were acquired from official listings (see Camplin [2017] for

example commissary store lists from other institutions). They are not static yet did not change over my time in the facility. Ramen prices were derived from many prisoner accounts across times and settings. There were no major discrepancies in reported prices.

Fresh produce was particularly sought-after. "Fresh veggies are like lobster in here," said one man, biting into what he called a "black market zucchini" on his lunch break. Depending on the quality and type, a smuggled vegetable or fruit was valued at one or two packets of ramen in the underground market. Onions and bell peppers were particularly popular and were staples in prisoners' "homemade" cuisine. Higher-paid prisoners were better able to afford such products. As one staffer overseeing the call center said with a grin, "These fools make enough money that they can buy all the [smuggled] food coming out of the kitchens." In addition, one soup could be traded for an envelope. Two bought a sweatshirt. Six bought a complete pair of thermal undershirt and bottoms (a "pretty good deal," according to one man). Approximately four soups could be traded for a smuggled bag of coffee. One could be traded for denture adhesive. Six bought a bag of loose tobacco for rolling cigarettes (the commissary offered two brands at different prices, each fetching the same black-market price). And, even though "tailor-made" (i.e., packaged) cigarettes cost far more than soups in the commissary store, a single soup could be traded for five cigarettes. A pack of one popular cigarette brand cost approximately $8.00 ($0.40 per cigarette) at the SSP commissary, meaning that a $0.59 soup could fetch $2.00 worth of cigarettes, speaking to the value of cheap food over tobacco products in the informal economy.

On some occasions, participants referred to the commissary cost of goods that they purchased in the black market, but this was uncommon. It typically occurred when

discussing disputes over price markups, which sometimes arose in exchanges across racial/ethnic lines. For instance, during a lunch break one day, a Mexican-American man in the sign shop told his friends about a piece of fruit he attempted to buy from a white prisoner on the yard. Looking up from his meal, he said, "One guy had a green apple yesterday. But he wanted *three soups* for it!" The others appeared shocked: "*What?* Shit," the second man exclaimed. "Is that a high price?" I asked. "That's a buck eighty," replied the third, "That's three meals in here, man." Taking another bite, the original man uttered, "That's a lot." Shaking his head, he continued, "I really wanted it, but damn, I can't afford that." His friends nodded in understanding.

This reference to the rounded-up $1.80 commissary store cost for three packs of soups suggests that these men remained aware of dollar costs of the ramen economy, even if they did not always convert directly to black market values. Additionally, this conflict over pricing between members of different racial/ethnic groups is indicative of the tense nature of prison food practices. The rules of prison "racial politics" standardly prevent prisoners from sharing food across racial lines (Goodman 2014; Valentine and Longstaff 1998). Prisoner peddlers are often willing to trade with buyers of other groups, but often at increased prices.

Many such exchanges were made through *inmate stores*: black market shops operated by enterprising individuals out of their prison bunks (Irwin 2005). Many prisoners purchased goods from such stores frequently. Unlike the prison commissary, which was only open for orders one day per week, inmate stores remained almost constantly accessible. Additionally, some goods—especially clothing—were regularly out of stock in the commissary, but many hungry men would literally sell the clothes off their backs for

some soups. Maurice illustrated just this when he showed off a recent purchase one day at work: "I bought my new thermals—top and bottom—[for] 6 soups." Some housing units were home to specialized enterprises that solely sold tobacco products. They offered individual "tailor-made" cigarettes taken from full packs, as well as the bagged pipe tobacco that prisoners relied on to hand roll their own smokes. Additionally, they stocked up on rolling papers, which were sometimes hard to come by. Said one prisoner: "Rolling papers are like *gold!*" Cigarette stores were especially profitable early in the week, when many addicted men grew more desperate if their tobacco supplies went dry before Wednesday, when the commissary opened.

Not just anyone was permitted to operate a store out of their bunks. To do so, one had to be officially endorsed by the "head" of their respective racial clique on the yard. If allowed to work this particular hustle, store runners were expected to pay a "tax" on all sales to this racialized hierarchy. To fail to do so or to operate without approval was to risk violent retaliation. Even with this taxation, however, incarcerated shopkeepers could expect to earn more than they might from a prison work assignment. To be successful, they often sought to avoid placement into a work program—or aimed to get fired upon assignment—so that they might instead operate their store 24/7. When I asked one participant, Larry, what his plans were during the final 120 days of his sentence, he replied, "I'll just try to keep out of the food factory. I run my own store here, so I can make more if I stay around here [on the yard]."

Debts were common amongst prisoners reliant on black market purchases. Many owed back payments of ramen to the operators of personal stores, which often operated on systems of credit (another potential benefit over the commissary for prisoners low on

funds). Those who repaid debts quickly might be granted higher credit limits. They could even refinance debts with goods acquired on credit from different black-market stores. One participant outlined how it worked:

> [When a prisoner] owes somebody store, he'll go and get it from somebody *else's* store. Then he got good *credit* at that [first] store [because he paid the debt]. So, then he get more from that store. It's a cycle—that bill keep going up and up!

Maintaining good credit and paying debts was important. Those who failed to do so risked becoming targets of reprisal. "We *men*—our word is our bond," I was told. "That's the *one* thing we gotta hold on to in here. But some people, they word *ain't* bond. Come to find out, they ain't *shit.*" Another reported: "I've seen fights over ramen. Who the fuck gonna fight about ramen noodles?? That's fifteen *cents* on the outs!" he exclaimed with frustration. As one man attested, "People get killed over soup, y'know 'mean?" Dramatic displays of aggression were part of life on the yard. In warehouse prisons like SSP, "there is still considerable intergroup hostility, but overall, there is a general détente among hostile groups" (Irwin 2005: 111). Accordingly, the ramen economy tended to operate relatively smoothly day-to-day, despite some friction.

Black market services and shadow labor

To acquire ramen for use in the informal market, many prisoners simply purchased them from the commissary whenever able. Most men, however, earned too little from their penal labor assignments to maintain a steady flow of ramen while still being able to make other necessary purchases. And, while the price of ramen noodles had increased in the commissary over the last decade, prisoner wages had not risen. As one man put it, wages had not kept pace with ramen noodle inflation: "They're *sixty* cents in here. They were twenty, thirty cents 10 years ago. And we're still getting the same pay. So, every time I look at the price sheet I have, it goes up a penny here, three cents there, where it's been accumulating throughout these years and *no* pay has been going up. … That's one of the issues in here."

To account for this inflation and supplement their formal wages, many turned to shadow work, or "compensatory subsistence strategies that are fashioned or pursued in the shadow of more conventional work…because participation in those markets fails to provide a living wage" (Snow 1993: 146). In prison, this was referred to as having a "hustle." Even amongst those with steady work assignments, a common mantra at SSP was "you gotta have a hustle to survive." In other words, absent a steady flow of money from family or friends on the outside, many prisoners relied on illicit trade or services to afford food and other goods. For many, this was second nature as they had maintained illicit or informal hustles before prison. According to the sagacious Alberto, "I learned both ways [to work]—legal and illegal. The illegal is *survival*. Put it this way: if a nuclear bomb dropped today, the people who know survival are the ones who will make it." Many different hustles could be observed at SSP. One food factory worker outlined them as such:

> Some people clean houses or some people—you just got to find a hustle, man. If you know how to draw, you draw. If all you know how to do is sell drugs, then you sell drugs. That simple. Me, when I don't have enough money, I don't go clean houses or none of that. Sometimes I'll make a phone call for somebody [who lost phone privileges] or whatever, that's some money right there, but I don't do that that much. But people gamble and all that stuff. I mean, there's all *kinds* of things you could do.

One quickly apparent hustle was stealing food goods to trade in the black market. Theft (or "boosting") was common in the kitchens and food prep programs. Some even regarded it as a standard perk of these positions. One man said, "I don't look at it as stealing. I look at it as making the pay right." Another attested, "I don't make enough to *buy* food from this job." Dean justified these practices with a sarcastic wit: "They pay us [under fifty] cents an hour, don't feed us enough at meals, and jack up the prices of everything in commissary. *Big* surprise that people are stealing fresh vegetables." A prisoner called Santos working in the meat prep station of the food factory was particularly boastful of his past pilfering accomplishments during an interview. "I know what it takes to be a booster," he proclaimed. When asked for clarification, he said:

> SANTOS: I can get away with certain things that people always [ask], 'How'd you do

that?' 'I don't know.' … I surprise myself sometimes.

RESEARCHER: Can you give me an example?

SANTOS: Yeah, I can give you an example. When we were doing turkey, I took 25 pounds back to the yard.

RESEARCHER: 25 pounds?

SANTOS: Back to the yard. … Yeah.

RESEARCHER: But they pat you down?

SANTOS: Yeah, they do pat us down. You always have to be on your Ps and Qs; you have to learn how to do it. And I was successful. I was one of the lucky ones that got away [that day]. Some people got caught.

RESEARCHER: When [staffers] catch you doing that, what do they do?

SANTOS: When you get caught doing that, it's a major [offense]. You get a ticket, you get sent to the yard, you're fired here from the food factory depending on what it is. And then you get restitution—you got to pay back whatever you took.

Despite this risk, boosting items like the desirable turkey meat was a reliable way to make money on the prison yard:

RESEARCHER: So, when you get things like [that] back to the yard, how much can you trade it for?

SANTOS: It all depends. On that, I made 35 bucks on what I took.

Aside from food smuggling, prisoners sold various services. Some cleaned others' bunks for one soup per week. For one to two soups (depending on the amount of clothes and linens), some washed others' laundry. Others gambled for soup. At one work site, I observed prisoners placing bets in a workplace football pool. Each bet a single soup on their picks over several games. The eventual winner was awarded the pot (around 15 soups). Some made most of their living gambling, relying on winnings for day-to-day sustenance. According to one working prisoner, Rogers:

ROGERS: One way or another, everything in prison is about money. People will wash your clothes, hustle—anything to make money. I got it figured out. If I only spend

twenty dollars a week, I'll have twenty-three-hundred saved when I get out.

RESEARCHER: Do you make enough working here to spend twenty a week?

ROGERS: No way. I play [the card game] pinochle every week. Make about twenty-five bucks.

Some prisoners operated as handymen, repairing others' possessions for a small fee. If a pair of eyeglasses broke, for example, visiting the optometrist could entail long waits and potentially missing work; however, a prisoner with the proper skill (or access to helpful materials, often acquired through smuggling) could be commissioned to make the repair. When an older man working in the food factory, Delroy, appeared with a broken pair of glasses one morning, I asked him how he planned to get them fixed. He informed me:

DELROY: If I went through and waited for the, uh, optometrist, they'd tell me I can't come in for work [until it's fixed]. I got a friend—they got some special strong tape. He's gonna fix 'em up for me.

RESEARCHER: What do you pay for something like that?

DELROY: Well, the *first* time they broke, another guy fixed it for me, and I gave him a, uh, a dollar [one soup].

Prisoners with steadier flows of income—whether from family providing funds from the outside or from high wages earned in a top-tier prison job—could even hire other prisoners to work as their "private security" around the yard. It was not uncommon to see one call center worker, for instance, closely accompanied by one or two other men at all times as he traversed the open prison yard or housing units in following the work day. "These guys have more money, so they have more power on the yard," said one staffer. Gesturing toward an incarcerated call center salesman closely flanked on either side by two other men, the staffer added: "They *hire* people."

Another common hustle was producing artistic "hobbycraft." This was the practice of selling drawings, small sculptures, or other artworks to other prisoners. For instance, Alex, a recent addition to the sign shop crew at the time of fieldwork, was a renowned portrait artist around the institution. Because of the demand for his services, he shared that he did not rely heavily on wages from his work in the shop. "I could be making more [money] doing my portraits," he said. "I'm in here for the experience, really." He also designed tattoos for prisoners willing to pay. Showing me an intricate webbed design (which he referred to as a "fractal mandala") that he had recently sketched for this purpose, he shared that he received the equivalent of fifteen dollars in soups for the image. This was lower than his normal fee "because the guy is a friend." Typically, Alex would expect twenty or thirty dollars for tattoo artwork.

Many prisoners purchased tattoo designs from Alex or other incarcerated artists and paid other men to commit the art to their skin. Some were quite proud to show off their illicit ink. Twisting his arm to reveal a faded image of a heavyset, bikini-clad woman tattooed on the back of his forearm, BB proudly exclaimed, "This is my fat lady!" Joining in, one of his coworkers pulled up his sleeve to reveal a detailed brick wall on his shoulder. "Here's my prison wall, see?" Pointing to a series of names, he added, "I got my kids here, down my arm. The bad thing is when you start out with children and you end up with grandchildren! [When] you start running out of canvas, it's time to go home."

"Amen," BB called back. His coworkers went on, this time gesturing to tattooed calendar pages floating beneath the prison wall. "And here's my dates—'04, '05. People on the outside will say your calendar is your badge of honor. No, it's not. It's a reminder of how long you took yourself away from what *matters* to you." Nodding solemnly, BB added: "That's right. People on the outside get tattoos for no reason. In here, *every* inmate tattoo means something. *None* of them are without meaning."

Purchasing hobbycraft artwork to use for tattoos or simply to adorn one's bunk was not uncommon. However, many hobbycraft hustles depended on sales to those intending to send something nice home to their children or partners. Around the holiday season, Alex's informal business shifted to drafting Christmas cards for others. One day in mid-December, I found him leaning low over a sketchbook in between screen printing jobs in the sign shop. Looking at me from the corner of his eye, he shared that he was drawing a picture for his child as a gift and held up the book for me to see. The page contained a beautifully detailed pencil illustration of a lion, a tiger, and a dragon. I asked if he had been busy with holiday art commissions, to which he responded with a grunt:

> Yeah, but I've been turning down a lot of it to work on things for my own family. And people get *mad* about it. Like, 'Here, I need you to fix my Christmas 'cause I don't know what to do. Take these four [photos] and draw them as one big picture and I'll give you six dollars.' 'Uh, sorry man, I don't have time right now to do that.' And they huff off like '*Whatever!*' I've had four people do that to me and three of them are [coworkers] in the shop!

While Alex's shadow labor grew in popularity, some hustles suffered. A decision some time back by the Deputy Warden had reclassified sculptures as contraband. At the time of fieldwork, prison officials had not yet forced anyone to discard such objects; however, they had banned them from the list of items that prisoners could mail home to family. As a result, enterprising sculptors like Lemmy had received far fewer orders for their wares. "I used to do hobbycraft," he shared one day. "I made roses and football helmets and sold 'em. Best roses you ever saw—ask anybody. They were great. But they marked 'em contraband, so I had to stop that." The process of creating these works of art was challenging, as clay and other sculpting materials were not available in the commissary. Instead, prisoners like Lemmy managed with what limited supplies they had on hand, often getting quite creative. Though typically quite reserved, Lemmy grew animated when I asked him how he made his football helmet sculptures one afternoon. "I made those out of denture cream and glue and baby powder. You can make a nice putty. I

shaped out the helmets, all the detail. The face masks were made out of rolled up paper." He mimed the process of tightly rolling out the paper as he spoke. "I painted em—did all the logos, all the teams. Sold those for eight dollars. But since it's unauthorized, I had to stop."

Lemmy later shared that one reason he had so persistently pursued a position in the sign shop was because the profits from his hustle had diminished after the contraband ruling. Still, this did not stop him from occasionally trying to make a sale, especially around the holidays. Noticing the football team logo that his coworker, Scotty, had drawn on a plastic cup one day, Lemmy gestured and said, "Hey, I can make you a football helmet! A real nice one—about this big," cupping his hands to indicate a space of around four inches. "Eight bucks!" Raising his eyebrows, Scotty replied, "Somebody made me a big one a while back to send my son, but it broke. Are they letting us send 'em out again?"

"Nah, that's the problem," Lemmy sighed. "Man, I would if I could send it," Scotty said. "As soon as we can send 'em out again, I'll buy one though." Uttering a defeated-sounding "Yeah, alright," Lemmy nodded and turned to walk away.

Discussion: The Risks of Informal Market Participation

Federal Bureau of Prisons policy—shared by most state agencies—prohibits unauthorized prisoner sales and trading (U.S. Department of Justice 2011). DOC orders governing SSP reflected this. Nevertheless, participants reported a growing reliance on illicit trade and labor, sometimes culminating in debt, fear of potential violence, and risk of formal

punishments (via work demotion or expulsion, disciplinary tickets, or more). Stagnant wages often contributed to dependence on underground trade (Guilbaud 2012) and workers sorted into the bottom reaches of the penal labor hierarchy had less access to formal market outlets.

Often, regulations prohibiting illicit trade were only selectively enforced; simple exchanges were often overlooked as an inevitable facet of prison life. One prison staffer shared, "I'm okay with letting little shit slide. I see it, *but*—," he shrugged. Nevertheless, when overseers deemed a prisoner's behavior to be excessive or problematic in some way, they could be quick to act. Men who operated "inmate stores," for example, were at constant risk of being "rolled up" if their entrepreneurship was deemed disruptive to standard operations. To be rolled up was to have correctional officers arrive at your bunk unannounced in the middle of the night, wake you up, command you to collect all of your belongings and roll them up into your bedroll, and lead you to a bus to an unknown destination. Typically, rolled up prisoners would be driven to a new prison facility across the state. Sometimes they might even be relocated to a neighboring state as part of exchange deals between different DOC offices.

One day in the sign shop, a worker called Luisito, who rarely if ever missed his shifts, failed to show. I learned from shop chatter that he had been rolled up the night before. It turned out that Luisito had been operating a cigarette store out of his bunk on the side. No one had yet heard to where he had been moved. The civilian manager of the shop, Mr. Edwards, confirmed these rumors to me later. "Some of these guys run what you might call black market stores, which is illegal. I've been told in the past that Luisito buys cigarettes and sells them individually. That's illegal." Taking a long drag of his own

cigarette, Edwards shared that it was uncommon for higher-paid workers like his sign shop crew to run such stores; however, "for a lot of these guys [prisoners], that sort of business … is commonplace. It's about *survival*." Indeed, it was uncommon for a sign shop worker or call center salesman to be sanctioned in such a way. Another civilian staffer in the shop, Dempsey, said of the occurrence, "It's *rare* for guys from in here to get rolled up." Recall the words of CO Bush from Chapter 1: "You don't want these guys moving from skilled jobs—the sign shop, the call center. … So, I'll place a work hold on the skilled workers." Still, despite the rarity of the occurrence for those who had reached the top, most had observed many roll-ups during their prison tenure. A few days after Luisito disappeared, another shop worker, Willie, took control of his work station and labors continued as usual, without further reference to the former colleague.

These happenings were far more common in the middle and bottom tiers of the carceral employment system. Those unable to secure top-tier work typically remained financially needier than their higher-status counterparts and were forced to rely more heavily on black market channels. For them, the informal economy truly was central to "survival," in the words of Edwards. As a result, they faced increased risk of sanctions from COs or administrators unhappy with their underground dealings. "The cops [COs]—they don't like if you're selling stuff," one man shared, adding, "and [if] they *see* you selling stuff, you're going to get in trouble for it. You know what I mean? But sometimes if you're hungry, you just got to do what you got to do." The soft-spoken Josh relayed that many food factory workers stole food because they lacked other options. "But it's risky," he said, "it's a risk-versus-reward type thing." For the majority, smuggling, hustling, and heavy

reliance on underground purchases often seemed the only viable alternatives. “People that are broke, [or] that can't work or don't,” said Josh, “they're pretty much S.O.L.”

The highest-paid prisoners at SSP had notably different experiences of punishment, being largely buffered from much of this risk. They could purchase more commissary items and even avoid unappetizing state meals, buy TVs and other entertainment items to help pass the time of long sentences, upgrade to better quality boots or replenish other worn-down clothing, visit the doctor as needed, and call home on a regular basis, or even send home prison remittances. Those who were able to save for reentry were able to leave prison in a much more stable position that those forced to exit with nothing. What’s more, not being driven to the black market helped these men avoid the risk of punishments like being sent to a higher security yard or receiving added time to their sentencing, which could otherwise directly impact prospects for (and time to) release. High-status prisoners who nevertheless opted to participate in the underground economy were privileged in this sphere as well, for they were better able to stockpile ramen noodles with which they could regularly pay others to complete menial services, acquire fresh produce and other healthier yet expensive foods, and all the while avoid going into debt with the operators of informal inmate stores. In these ways, the employment system’s function of sorting and sieving incarcerated laborers not only generated notably different experiences of carceral punishment, but differentially exposed the disadvantaged to greater risk.

CONCLUSION:

Punishment & Labor Under Neoliberal Penology

Of course, prisons and the system of forced labor do not correct the criminal; they only punish him and ensure society against the evildoer's further attempts on its peace and quiet.

– Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from a Dead House*

Prisoners have always worked; only the State has been their exploiter, even as the individual employer has been the robber of organized labor.

– Emma Goldman, "Prisons: A Social Crime and Failure"

Labor has been central to penal punishment throughout the history of the United States (McLennan 2008). In the words of Jonathan Simon (1993), "Wherever you look in the development of modernist penality you will find labor. Exhort the offenders with religious tracts, but make them work. … Educate them as citizens, but make them work. Treat their pathological features, but make them work" (39). From the inception of the first penitentiary on American soil, federal, state, and private entities alike have relied on the extraction of prisoner labor power. More recent decades have seen heightened incarceration rates and rising privatization. The swelling prisoner population today is put to work at record numbers, with approximately two-thirds of current U.S. prisoners working behind bars (Stephan 2008). Rather than a far-removed total institution, the

carceral facility of the neoliberal era is more than ever embedded in the economic world through the work performed by the incarcerated.

It is no surprise, then, that labor activities influence much of prison operations on-the-ground. Prison life and operations are largely organized around work programming. Popular and political rhetoric would tell us that this centrality of work reflects the rehabilitative nature of imprisonment—that the hundreds-of-thousands of captive laborers are working toward the development of new, marketable skills as well as the restoration of work ethics. Conversely, critics contend that the pervasiveness of penal labor reveals its capacity to do great harm to these men and women already at odds with mainstream society—that such work is merely punitive at best and exploitative at worst.

Beyond institutional operations at the administrative level, work remains central to the experience of prison for those enduring it. It occupies and organizes the daylight hours of most (Guilbaud 2010). Additionally, labor programming is vital for prisoners economically. In states where prisoners are paid for their labors, wages vary from pennies to over five dollars hourly (Sawyer 2017). With more and more penal expenses being shifted to the incarcerated—via the privatization of care and services, and rising fees associated with imprisonment (e.g., Buchanan 2007)—the prisoner pay gap directly affects the ability of incarcerated individuals to acquire basic goods and necessities through the prison commissary or through black market exchanges. Beyond material discrepancies, work also remains central to prisoner perceptions of self (see Maruna 2001 for more on the lingering effects of prison work on personal narratives).

Given the impact that penal labor practices may have at these levels, important questions have lingered. As the project of mass incarceration got underway in the 1970s

(Garland 2001b; Western 2006), researcher access to the inside of the nation's prisons largely vanished (Cunha 2014; Goodman 2011; King and Liebling 2008; Reiter 2014; Wacquant 2002). I have sought to illustrate the ground-level realities of life and labor in this shrouded institution. How is this system actually structured at the institutional level? How do prisoners navigate and endure the realities of carceral labor? How might institutional structure interact with prisoner practices and resources to shape experiences of punishment for different prisoner groups? Underlying all of this: How does contact with this institution shape inequalities along the lines of race, ethnicity, and class? These and related questions inspired this project. In this final chapter, I address what the answers to these questions may mean for the form of function not just of punitive labor, but of punishment writ large in the contemporary era. Inspired by the tradition of the Extended Case Method school of ethnography (Burawoy 1998, 2009), I take this opportunity to "extend outward" from the space and time of my fieldwork at Sunbelt State Penitentiary in order to discuss the broader social forces at play behind (or revealed by) the on-the-ground processes that I observed. To begin, I will summarize these observations.

Prison Labor On-The-Ground

As in many U.S. penal facilities, work was mandatory for able SSP prisoners and the institution housed a broad range of jobs. Prisoner and staff member participants alike described a hierarchy of desirability for work programs. Those that participants regarded as the "best" assignments within the institution shared many characteristics with "good

jobs" in the free world: significantly higher pay, exposure to skilled labor activities, and greater degrees of autonomy, stability, and opportunity for mobility (Kalleberg 2011). They also tended to be less exposed to the institution's security apparatus and facilitated work experiences that reportedly enabled working prisoners to "escape prison in their mind." Conversely, "bad prison jobs" offered relatively low pay, requiring workers to toil in deskilled labor with little autonomy amidst instability and limited opportunities for mobility. These sites were often referred to as "prison within the prison" and featured repressive oversight from the penal security system. Between these poles, certain positions at SSP were understood as "middle tier" work programs, whose combination of desirable and undesirable characteristics elicited prisoner ambivalence.

While most desired access to the many perks and securities that good prison jobs had to offer, the structure of the prison employment system was competitive. It privileged those with valued combinations of characteristics, resources, and work skills. The most prized (i.e., personally and materially rewarding) work assignments were typically allocated to those already possessing a "proper understanding" of how to navigate job market and interview conventions (a store of cultural capital), strong ties to those already working in such positions or to correctional staff with the authority to influence hiring decisions (social capital), and professional and work skills relevant to the tasks carried out in desirable prison jobs (another form of cultural capital). These valued skills and resources were linked to perceptions wrapped up with race, ethnicity, and nationality. Patterns of ethnoracial discrimination were apparent in program assignments, as was task segregation within work sites. Whereas previous scholarship has revealed racial and ethnic disparities in incarceration rates (Simon 1993; Wacquant 2009; Wakefield and Uggen 2010) and in

hurdles to labor market reentry (Freeman 2008; Pager 2007; Western and Pettit 2010), these patterns reveal the continuation of discriminatory processes inside the prison and within the microcosms of prison work. Outside inequalities are reinforced in part through the process of job assignments; those better situated to succeed in outside labor markets do so on the inside as well, while those found lacking are denied opportunities to amass marketable capabilities. In this way, the carceral employment system acted as a *sieve*, filtering and sorting the prisoner population along criteria that the institution deems useful, resulting in notably different experiences of punishment in terms of material wellbeing as well as subjective understandings.

While an extensive body of literature explores the effects of incarceration (and, to a lesser extent, specific prison experiences) on ex-prisoners' reentrance to society, this project uniquely explores more immediate impacts of stratification while still behind bars. Work-related inequities shape, for instance, the form and outcomes of prisoners' pursuits of personal dignity. I have outlined different strategies that prisoners rely on to assert and evaluate self-worth through labor, which I evaluated as "work games" (Burawoy 1979). These games varied across sites and represent different approaches to prisoner (in)dignity, shaped and limited by the structures of each. All sites housed some form of coping game: ritualized distractions from formal work routines aimed at breaking up the "long day's grind" (Roy 1959). These playful diversions assisted in *tolerating* indignities germane to prison life. Less desirable work sites also housed "resistance games" (Burawoy 1979), through which low-status workers clashed with supervisors over despotic labor processes and staff expressions of arbitrary authority. These agentic expressions of grievances enabled penal laborers to *defy* indignity and express collective discontent. Lastly, upper-

tier work programs allowed for what I have referred to as a "professionalism game," in which prisoners sought overseer approval and distinction from lower-tier prisoners. By adopting and performing the role of professionals, contemporaries of workers in their fields in the outside world, prisoners sought to actively *reinject* dignity into their lives. Through participation in such games, these men implicitly consented to the underlying structures of penal labor. Practices and discourses involved in the professionalism game in particular reified justifications for the institution of penal labor itself.

Additionally, this project has illustrated how labor sorting may differentially impact prisoner wellbeing. Workers' positioning in the labor hierarchy—with a pay disparity ranging from approximately $0.05 per hour to over $1.00 per hour—shapes their ability to participate in the formal economic market. More lucrative work programs enable workers to afford supplemental food, medical care, telephone and mail contact with family, and entertainment and electricity access, all of which prisoners must pay for out of their scant wages. Lower-paid prisoners, conversely, depend more fully on the care of the state, the quality of which has markedly declined in recent years (Gottschalk 2010). Wages also influence access to underground prison markets, in which ramen noodle soup packets reign as the de facto informal currency. Those who can afford to procure ramen have access to additional nutritional and entertainment goods, as well as the skills of informal service providers working out of their prison bunks. Those with limited access to this packaged currency, however, often had few options but to *provide* these services in shadow labor markets—doing others' laundry, bunk cleaning, providing security, and other unofficial jobs—to supplement limited wages. These illicit informal labors further exposed them to the surveillance and disciplinary structures of the prison, generating risk.

These phenomena map on to more macro scale developments in American penality. In what follows, I provide a quick overview of past and current scholarship on evolving corrections strategies in the United States and denote my own contributions to this enterprise.

Penology: Old, New, & Beyond

Malcolm Feeley and Jonathan Simon (1992) highlighted the emergence of new penal processes following the 1970s. Before this era, U.S. penal policy was largely "concerned with responsibility, fault, moral sensibility, diagnosis, or intervention and treatment of the individual offender" (Feeley and Simon 1992: 452). This "Old Penology" could be identified by the prevalence of traditional discourses emphasizing clinical assessment and retributive judgment, objectives centering on recidivism and the control of crime, and ostensibly more equitable techniques which targeted individual offenders and pathologies. According to these scholars, the criminal law of this time focused primarily on moral responsibility and the assignment of guilt, approaching incarceration as a route to rehabilitation.

The conservative bent of 1970s and 1980s penal policy, however, signaled the arrival of a "New Penology." This new approach to crime and punishment was more "concerned with techniques to identify, classify, and manage groupings sorted by dangerousness" (Feeley and Simon 1992: 452). This in many ways reflected what John Irwin (1985) had said of the U.S. jail system in years prior—that it functioned in large part

to manage risk imposed by the "underclass" or so-called "rabble" of society. This new penal process was evidenced by the emergence of new penal discourses emphasizing probability and risk, systemic developments in penal objectives in favor of more efficient forms of population control, and techniques prioritizing aggregate offender groups rather than individuals. Demographic disparities in the rising prisoner population suggested that this new correctional strategy served to reinforce ethnoracial hierarchy through the warehousing of minority populations (Wacquant 2000) (a pattern that has been globalized; Davis and Gibson-Light forthcoming).

In the years since Feeley and Simon systematized this penological transition, scholars have documented continuing developments in the carceral field. The current moment in U.S. carceral history may be characterized by several interwoven penological, political, and economic trends that have led to an emphasis on offenders as a threat to security as well as budgets. An expanding neoliberal emphasis on personal and fiscal responsibility (Wacquant 2010) has further shaped the prison system through increased privatization (Aviram 2015) and thinning penal budgets (leading, accordingly, to trimming back services) (Lynch 2010). Despite rising prisoner populations (Glaze and Kaeble 2014; Western et al. 2004), spending on prison operations per prisoner in state and private institutions alike has decreased (Kyckelhahn 2012). The most recent alterations to the U.S. penal landscape came with the Great Recession of the past decade, which precipitated anxieties over the *per*-prisoner costs of incarceration (e.g., Aviram 2016b).

The culmination of these economic and political forces has produced a prison system that is overcrowded, underfunded, and offering fewer and poorer quality services. Though neoliberalism has been the dominant political-economic logic in the U.S. for some

decades (Schwartzman 2013), evolutions in neoliberal approaches to punishment in recent years have precipitated changes in the quality of care behind bars as well as in prisoner treatment and behavior. Men and women in today's penal institutions face informal policies of "punitive frugality" (Lynch 2010)—administrations scaling back the quality and number of prison services, satisfying political agendas to remain "tough on crime" while maintaining fiscal responsibility (Gottschalk 2006, 2010). To this end, prisons have trimmed critical features like healthcare and psychiatric treatment (Clark 1972; Clements 1985; Pogorzeleski et al. 2005), reduced the size and quality of meals and privatized food services (Gottschalk 2006; Smoyer and Lopes 2017), and slashed "nonessential" services such as educational and vocational training (Clements 1985; Gottschalk 2010; Schlanger 2006).

The emergent neoliberal penology

A small but growing literature has begun to examine this shifting strategy as evidence of a Neoliberal Penology (or Penality). The majority of this work adopts a macro lens. Harcourt (2010) defines this phenomenon in political-philosophical terms as "a form of rationality in which the penal sphere is pushed outside political economy and serves the function of a boundary: the penal sanction is marked off from the dominant logic of classical economies as the only space where order is legitimately enforced by the state" (77). Wacquant (2009) frames this as an evolution in the form and function of social control, coalescing "around the shrill reassertion of penal fortitude, the pornographic exhibition of the taming of moral and criminal deviancy, and the punitive containment and

disciplinary supervision of the problem populations dwelling at the margins of the class and cultural order" (xx). Heavy reliance on carceral institutions (paralleled in punitive welfare policy), "partakes of a political project that responds to rising social insecurity and its destabilizing effects in the lower rungs of the social and spatial order" (ibid.: 172). Regarding this development in broad terms, as these authors do, is vital for interpreting on-the-ground developments, yet can pose empirical challenges. As O'Malley (2015) notes, "the linkages between 'neoliberalism' and penality are often vague or merely assumed, rendering the [Neoliberal Penality] thesis highly problematic" (1). Not neglecting the difficulties necessarily entailed in attempting such linkages, I will here attempt to systematize the elements of changing penological approaches that have been observed. Following the model of Feeley and Simon (1992), I do so by examining emergent discourses, objectives, and techniques apparent in other recent empirical works as well as my own findings.

First, in this changing political landscape, new correctional *discourses* have developed. Advancing beyond the New Penological emphasis on correctional punishment as a means of managing risk, post-recession political rhetorics have instead highly prized budgetary concerns (Gottschalk 2015). According to Hadar Aviram (2010), "The current financial crisis, complicated by the rise in correctional expenses and in their relative share in the budget, has yielded a new set of correctional discourses and practices, fueled by a language of scarcity" (2-3). To be sure, prison budgeting has become a "purple" issue, with conservative and liberal figureheads aligning in their critique of current carceral trends as excessively expensive, among other concerns (Lilly et al. 2019: 343). Rhetorical regard for the incarcerated has shifted as well. Particularly, "the advent of a neoliberal ethos has

transformed our understanding of the inmate, from … *ward* to a burden on the state's budget and a *consumer* of its services" (Aviram 2015: 120, emphasis added). Others have documented new discourses of "responsibilization," particularly in female institutions. These rhetorics assert the value of a self-governing, self-sufficient penal subject (Ballesteros-Pena 2017) and may accompany new practices and operational designs aimed at promoting such values (McCorkel 2003).

Discourses of austerity and responsibilization correspond with the advancement of changing penological *objectives* as well: namely, reassessing and ensuring the fiscal efficiency of prison operations. In some cases, this is apparent in pushes for decarceration in part for purposes of financial prudence (Aviram 2016b). Continued support for prison privatization has also risen as a priority in this context (Williams and Battle 2017). Prisoner labor, already historically central to carceral punishment in the United States (McLennan 2008), has been foundational in these developments. As Weiss (2001) notes:

> Today, at the end of the modern era…gaps in the labor market give new life to the idea of prison industry. Once again, prisoners are a potential resource; in this sense, they have come full circle. The 'New Economy' of service industries, globalization, and market liberalism can facilitate the return of prisoners to the circuit of production (264).

Finally, other scholarship highlights recent evolutions in penological *techniques*. Most notable has been the transference of the financial burdens of imprisonment. Cost-

shifting practices and fee structures behind bars—already prevalent in the years prior to the Great Recession (Buchanan 2007; Levingston 2007)—greatly expanded following this crisis (Aviram 2016a, 2016b). These "pay-to-stay" approaches to incarceration (Buchanan 2007), fueled by discourses framing prisoners as consumers of institutional services (Aviram 2015), find individuals behind bars now expected to fund or supplement basic amenities that institutions have trimmed back (Gottschalk 2010). The new prisoners-as-consumers are responsible for fees covering electricity, medical care, room and board, telephone use, and other amenities (Buchanan 2007; Gipson and Pierce 1996; Gottschalk 2010; Jackson 2007; Levingston 2007; Lynch 2010; Von Zielbauer 2007).

This dissertation research has contributed to the endeavor of mapping the changes in penology in the post-recession neoliberal era, first, by further elucidating what these contemporary penological discourses, objectives, and techniques look like *in situ* behind bars. The technique of cost-shifting, for instance, shaped the extent of the material strains experienced by low-status penal laborers at SSP. Similarly, discourses framing prisoners as consumers rather than primarily wards were evident in participant rhetorics regarding pay and the procurement of goods and services. Discourses of responsibilization also emerged in how prisoners and staffers discussed the value of work ethics and dedication to labor. This new penal environment contributed to varied carceral experiences between prisoner groups, generating and reproducing disparities amongst the prisoner population.

In addition, this work has revealed another technique that has taken shape: the facilitation of internal labor market competition. In constructing a hierarchical penal labor market, with desirable positions—and their subsequent pay and perks—distributed competitively yet opaquely (maintaining the employment system's "flexibility"

[Schwartzman 2013]), the contemporary prison in part ensures its objective of keeping institutional operations financially efficient whilst wielding subtler forms of control over the prisoner body. As one prisoner noted, "You know, if they brought somebody [a non-incarcerated workforce] in here to do this, they'd pay 'em at *least* ten dollars. … It's a sweatshop in here, that's all." Instead, the institution sorts and sieves its captive labor force, allocating higher-paying, skilled positions primarily to those already in possession of valued forms of capital, relegating others to deskilled tasks to maintain facility operations.

Furthermore, this system delivers on neoliberal discourses prizing responsibilization as well as the reframing of the prisoner-as-consumer. Consumption-oriented prisoners at SSP were openly concerned with costs. Top-tier positions were competitive in part because laborers were driven to attain higher wages to spend behind bars. Some even related complaints regarding taxpayer spending. For instance, when discussing discrepancies between publicly-available prison menus and the actual chow served to the incarcerated during mealtime, DS revealed the reach of the invisible hand into prison life when he exclaimed: "I be damned if I sit here and let you and my people on the outside—the ones that's not committing crimes—pay [taxes] for all this shit and be told it's good." Prison authorities, from his perspective, were not only complicit in the declining quality of care, but also kept taxpaying citizens in the dark. Prisoners like DS exhibited consumerist tendencies (frustrated with perceived misuse of funds and misrepresentation of goods) as well as a neoliberal emphasis on self-reliance and responsibility (concerned only for citizens *not* engaged in criminal activity). As the reinvented neoliberal state (Osborne 1993; Rondinelli and Cheema 2003) and prison (Wacquant 2010) continue to cut back on services and shift the cost of care to those in custody (Buchanan 2007; Levingston

2007; Lynch 2010), prisoners have come to rely more than ever on meager pay provided in exchange for increasingly deskilled labor. Within this system, in which prisoners feel "uncared for, ignored, frustrated, and humiliated" (Smoyer and Lopes 2017: 244), self-sufficiency is made paramount.

Table 6. Evolving U.S. Corrections Strategies			
	Discourses	**Objectives**	**Techniques**
Old Penology	Clinical diagnosis; retributive justice	Recidivism; crime control	Targeting the individual
New Penology	Probability; risk	Efficient population control	Targeting aggregate groups
Neoliberal Penology	Responsibilization; prisoner-as-consumer	Fiscally efficient operations	Cost-shifting; internal labor competition

Taken together, this set of penal discourses, objectives, and techniques corresponds with the conditions and priorities of contemporary, post-recession neoliberal polity. Just as the New Penology overlapped in many ways with (and had antecedents in) the Old Penology, the emergent Neoliberal Penology observable today builds to an extent upon the features of the prior era (driven no doubt by ongoing struggles between bureaucratic and political actors in the penal field [Goodman, Page, and Phelps 2017]) (see Table 6).

The structure of prison labor itself maps on to these developments in penality. Indeed, classic prison theorists Rusche and Kirchheimer ([1939] 2017) contend that labor needs directly correspond to penal form. Where supply of labor is low, according to this framework, "then the state and its penal institutions will be less ready to dispense with the valuable resources which their captives represent, and more likely to put offenders to work in some way or another" (Garland 1990: 93). Though scholars have problematized

particulars of Rusche and Kirchheimer's work (cf. Sutton 2002), their contention that "every system of production tends to discover punishments which correspond to its productive relationships" remains compelling (Rusche and Kirchheimer [1939] 2017: 5). In Gilded Age America, penal labor was directly deployed to fulfil the labor demands of large-scale industrial interests via convict leasing arrangements (McLennan 2008). Firms contracted mass prisoner labor power to toil in mines, fields, and factories with little to no regulatory oversight (Thompson 2011). Around the advent of mass incarceration, new legislation once again expanded the prison's ability to mobilize (and capitalize on) captive labor power (McLennan 2008).

As this dissertation has sought to illuminate, the world of work behind bars today has continued to evolve and has in fact grown quite complex. The expansive and hierarchical carceral labor market within the neoliberal prison not only extracts labor for a wide variety of tasks but does so with the consent and indeed enthusiasm of a large swath of this population. Much like the free world worksites examined by labor scholars (e.g., Burawoy 1979; Lopez 2007; Sallaz 2015), the contemporary prison workplace is gamified in ways that help further engender productivity, helping to mitigate or redirect conflict that might otherwise be leveled at correctional and operational staff. In these ways, control in the contemporary American prison has taken new shape.

In this manner, we might also maintain that, through labor, rehabilitation is fetishized. Recuperation of self-reliance and marketable skills through participation in labor is perceived as an alternative to the dog-eat-dog ethos of the prison yard. Yet, it is here, in the internal penal employment system, that competition and alienation flourish. The individualized quest for dignity and worth through work mystifies the productive force

of carceral labor. Rather than escaping this system of production by attempting to better one's reentry prospects and break the imprisonment cycle plaguing the nation's disenfranchised communities, competition and participation in the internal prison labor market instead inevitably supports the values and needs of the institution. As staffers noted, the prison employment system provides "a great incentive" because prisoners "have to have good behavior" in order to remain competitive for the top tier positions.[18] Even in those (numerous) cases in which the incarcerated indeed find legitimate appreciation for the work they do in prison, much of the rewards that they perceive in fact exemplify the fulfillment of needs that the institution itself has actively shirked.

Concluding Remarks

The expansive reliance on penal labor, the particular form that the prison employment system has taken, and the manner in which prisoners' work is organized each map on to the ethics and productive needs of the post-recession neoliberal era. Scholars have pointed to pathways neoliberalism has taken in its rise as a dominant American discourse and rationale for penal practice (see Lacey 2013). Building on this, I have outlined the techniques of neoliberal penality as implemented within prison walls, providing an in-depth look at the administration of neoliberal ethics within the carceral context. By focusing on prisoners' experiences, I highlight the ways in which neoliberalism is incorporated into the administration of punishment through mechanisms such as responsibilization, cost-shifting, and the facilitation of labor competition. Unlike past

studies of the macro connections between political economy and punishment (e.g., Enshen 2014; Lacey 2013; Sutton 2002), this research considers qualitative differences in carceral experiences, revealing ground-level influences of neoliberal trends on carceral outcomes. Burrowing beyond classical critical punishment scholarship, which attends to macro patterns of labor appropriation through incarceration (Rusche [1933] 1978; Rusche and Kirchheimer [1939] 2017), I call attention to the micro arenas in which labor is foregrounded in the contemporary prison, unpacking related consequences for prisoner wellbeing. Prison (and prison work) is not just removal from the outside world, a consequence in and of itself. It is, in a sense, its own world with its own consequences which matter to the people in it. But observations also remind us that this institution is a workplace, in many ways linked to external social and economic systems, and should be regarded (and regulated; see Appendix B) as such.

Through the internal employment system, the prison facilitates markedly different experiences of imprisonment. Outside disparities are reinforced by how the facility sorts and sieves its wards into different jobs, how work sites are organized and supervised, and via prisoners' practices in the workplace—through the interplay of the structure of the penal facility, the prison employment system, specific job contexts, formal and informal economic markets, and the strategic action of actors within these nested contexts. Thus, while contact with the prison system limits the job market opportunities of all ex-offenders ("marking them" [Pager 2007]), the resources, skills, and qualifications that they employ while inside the prison have powerful mediating and compounding effects on how individuals fare both during and following incarceration. In sum: carceral labor reproduces

and shapes inequalities along class, racial, and ethnic lines, highlighting the role of the prison as a contemporary site of deep and lasting stratification.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

This is an interview schedule for semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The following questions are meant to direct discussion about work. The interviewer will attempt to structure the conversation around the leading questions (indicated by "-"). If appropriate, the interviewer will ask probing questions (indicated by "•").

Basic autobiographical information

"Without revealing your name or other identifying information…"

- Tell me a little bit about yourself.
- What is your background?
    - What kind of work did you do before prison?
    - [Follow participant's lead. Probe if necessary. Discontinue if appropriate.]

History of work (personal experiences with prison work)

"Now, let's talk about your work experience in prison…"

- Tell me about your current work program assignment.
    - How long have you been in it?
    - How would you describe your job to someone who had no knowledge of it?
    - Was there ever been anything about this job that surprised you?
    - On the whole, how would you rate this job? Why? Have you always felt this way? (What changed?)
    - What are the benefits/perks of your work? Compared to other work programs?

    - What are some down sides of your work? Compared to other work programs?

- Tell me about the process of getting assigned to this work program.
    - How did you get involved with it?
    - Had you done similar work before? (Was this a consideration?)
    - Have you ever faced any barriers to getting the work you want? (How so?)
- Do you get along well with other people in the work program?
    - Can you tell me a little bit about your relationships with other workers/inmates?
    - Who do you consider to be your boss at work? What are they like? Can you tell me about a recent experience with that person/one of those people?
- What does your previous prison work experience look like?
    - Have you worked in other prison work programs?
    - Tell me about the process of moving from one work program to another.
- In your opinion, do inmates make enough money?
    - What makes you feel this way? (Do you earn enough for food/other goods?)
    - What other ways do people that you know make money in prison? (Contributions from family? "Hustles"?)

Plans for release

"Let's talk about the future…"

- Do you have any plans for your release? What do you plan to do?
    - Have you thought about what type of work you will do?
    - Where will you work? How did you choose that?
- How has your prison experience influenced your plans?

Conceptions of work (what work means to participants—assessing "work ethic")

"Now, I'd like to talk about work in general…"

[Throughout—try to get at participants' central logic for thinking about work.]

- What, in your view, is good work?
    - What makes it good?
    - Do you think other people might have different views? (Such as?)
- What is bad work?
    - What makes it bad?
    - Do you think others might have different ideas? (Such as?)
- Is work meaningful to you? (Why?)
    - Is work important for a person in general?
    - Is work important for personal growth? (Why/not?)
- During your life, have you changed your views on work?
    - How have your ideas changed?
    - What are the major lessons you've learned about work?

APPENDIX B: THOUGHTS ON POLICY

The purpose of this dissertation has not been to directly contend with particular policy platforms; however, certain considerations did emerge as I engaged in the processes of data collection and writing. These primarily revolved around the observation that the contemporary American prison (perhaps even more so now than historically [see McLennan 2008]) is indeed a workplace and should be regulated as such.

First, paying $0.05 (or even $1.00-plus) per hour for the performance of mandatory labor assignments is tantamount to slavery. Indeed, the International Labor Organization (1930, 1957, 2016) under the United Nations, as well as other labor groups, such as the AFL-CIO (1997), contend that prisoners' work in the United States in fact represents a form of forced labor akin to a "new slavery" (Bair 2008; see also Milman-Sivan 2013). According to this perspective, in many prisons, "slavery never ended…it was reinvented" (Benns 2015). As one participant in my study passionately noted: "It's a sweatshop! A full day's work might get you a soup." Another noted, "Prison is supposed to be about rehabilitation, but it's too *expensive*. So, what can we do?" What's more, penal pay structures today vary greatly between job sites, institutions, and states (Sawyer 2017). To correct for this, a national prison minimum wage is worthy of consideration. On this point, one penal laborer suggested that, "they should pay us [federal] minimum wage and have me pay rent and social security and take taxes from it!" Instituting minimum wage behind bars may also positively impact the working-class writ large. The current state of paltry prisoner pay acts to undercut wages in the outside world; raising them to a livable standard would correct for this (Smith 2017).

Another cause for alarm is that, in the midst of concerns over poor conditions and treatment, participants reported that grievance and claim structures remained ineffective and indeed risk-laden. Calavita and Jenness (2015) reveal that such issues are truly widespread. At ground-level, feelings of helplessness and frustration were pervasive. Such claim structures should be thoroughly reconstituted and monitored at a high level. Relatedly, general standards of care remain in dire need of enforcement. As Samuél pointed out, "*We* suffer for problems in the kitchen, problems on the yard, unsanitary conditions. … They don't care 'cause they don't eat the food we eat, use the bathrooms we use. They don't *care.*" Numerous court cases in recent years (for example, the class action suit alleging failure to meet basic mental health counseling needs in a Pennsylvania penitentiary [Thompson 2017] or the recurrent legal claims alleging willful prison healthcare inadequacy in Arizona [Schwartzapfel 2018]) highlight a continued failure to prevent or correct the dramatic degrees of service degradations that have been suffered by this vulnerable population. Such issues are likely to continue or worsen without increased public oversight.

Indeed, one reason that these and related issues are able to persist is that the prison remains a "black site," obscured from public view (Reiter 2014). My ethnographic access to the inside of a state prison was truly unique, but it should not remain so. The ability to empirically examine the lived realities of American incarceration should be encouraged and facilitated at the institutional, state, and federal levels, lest we risk a slide into barbarism behind bars for lack of adequate shared knowledge of the internal workings of carceral punishment. The challenges faced by correctional staff within these public institutions are equally deserving of further research along these lines.

Finally, any discussion, however brief, of penal reform is incomplete without some consideration of the prospect of abolition. The elimination of the death penalty and of solitary confinement are supported by ever-growing social movements in the United States and abroad. The abolition of penal labor, too, has champions (e.g., Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee 2014). A series of national prison strikes and work stoppages in recent years has raised the issue in political consciousness (Kim 2016; Losier 2018). Given the conditions surrounding carceral labor in the U.S., including its impacts on the reproduction of inequality that I have outlined, the topic remains worthy of continued consideration.

As with concerns over pay, facility conditions, and grievance reporting, abolition was a topic broached by participants in my study. For example, one man, to whom I will refer only as "AS," grew inquisitive when he spied me jotting down fieldnotes one day outside of one of the prison work sites. Pointing to my notebook, he asked:

> So, what's the story here? Prison labor? And what a *rotten* thing it is? History shows, whenever you use prisoners for labor—indentured servitude, forced labor, call it what you will—historically, it never works out. [But] that's the basis of Capitalism: labor, as cheap as you can get it, regardless of who it affects. The lobbyists push for it, subtly or otherwise, to keep things how they are.

Leaning in, he added, "We incarcerate more people than anywhere else in the world. And we use these people—they use *us*—to do *this*." He quickly flicked his wrist toward his workplace, adding, "All of this? *Profit*."

"So," I asked, "what's the solution to all of these issues?" He shook his head and responded, "I mean, how do you change *any* caste system? Any *slavery* system?" His eyes grew wide as he let the rhetorical question hang for a moment. Then, he gave a brief nod and swiped his hand as if to signal: do away with it.

At one time, the end of the U.S. prison system as we know it seemed imminent—and politically viable. For instance, the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals (1973), sponsored by the Department of Justice, concluded in the 1970s that the nation's penal facilities had overwhelmingly failed at their stated goals. A ten-year moratorium on the construction of carceral institutions was recommended (National Advisory 1973). Other factors took sway over this platform, leading to the emergence of mass incarceration, but the abolitionist ideal nonetheless saw support. Though the fields of sociology and criminology have been slower to adopt abolitionist platforms than other social scientific disciplines (Brown and Schept 2016), current trends in incarceration and the reemergence of debates over prison reform invite us to contribute to this discourse.

To dismantle or substitute one facet of the broader prison system, such as forced penal labor, the death penalty, or solitary confinement, represents what abolitionist scholars (e.g., Mathiesen 1974; Simon 2018) have referred to as a "partial abolition." Still, the prison remains one part of an interconnected patchwork resulting in—if not predicated on—inequality between social strata. In writing on the abolition of chattel slavery, W.E.B.

Du Bois ([1935] 2017) noted that "the abolition of slavery meant not simply abolition of legal ownership of the slave; it meant the uplift of slaves and their eventual incorporation into the body civil, politic, and social, of the United States" (170). With this in mind, penal abolitionist scholars today note that this endeavor, too, would necessarily require commitment to a "positive project"—not merely demolishing prison walls, but supplementing gradual decarceration with the introduction of major economic and political institutional structures designed to supplant those that have failed (see McLeod 2015). Indeed, "a more complicated framework may yield more options than if we simply attempt to discover a single substitute for the prison system" (Davis 2003: 106). In place of punitive criminal justice institutions that have time and again been deemed inequitable (and damaging) along the lines of class, race and ethnicity, and gender (Crittenden, Koons-Witt, and Kaminski 2018; Garland 2001b; Wakefield and Uggen 2010; Wacquant 2009a; Western 2006), this movement calls us to address social problems that precipitate the practices that we deem criminal. The goal of such a project, then, is "building the kind of society that does not need prisons" (Waskow 1972, quoted in Davis 2003).

Such a massive project would indeed entail society-wide changes. These may include allocating greater funding toward and restructuring educational institutions in order to diminish the current trend of "priming some kids for college and others for prison" (Goffman 2015; see also Heckman and Masterov 2007). It would also require the bolstering of mental healthcare and rehabilitation programming to combat the harsh consequences of mental and emotional disorders, addiction, and dual diagnosis that plague many communities (Pogorzeleski et al. 2005). Relatedly, decriminalizing drug use, the criminal enforcement of which disproportionately falls on large swaths of minority populations

(Beckett et al. 2006; Wacquant 2009b), as well as reforming policing and surveillance structures that profile and punish already-disadvantaged communities (Alexander 2010; Meehan and Ponder 2002), is required in order to diminish disproportionate penal punishments. This broad project must likely even entail actively combatting popular media portrayals that serve to reinforce racialized perceptions of criminality and threat while reifying now-naturalized criminal justice responses to many of society's ills (Carlson 2016; Davis 2003). And, against a central instrument of the maintenance of ethnoracial dominance from the ante-bellum through the contemporary era, a broad-reaching abolitionist future would necessarily challenge current conceptions of value linked to neoliberal ideals of self-reliance through formal labor, no matter how precarious or unrewarding (Brown 2018). Beyond the deconstruction of forced labor systems on the inside, this would include walking back the criminalization of labor market under- or non-participation (Wacquant 2009a) while promoting social welfare and living wage programming on the outside to combat socio-economic inequality, which is conclusively linked to higher rates of incarceration (Gottschalk 2015, 2016).

To be sure, this framework is quite comprehensive and complex, but so too are the political, economic, and social institutions that have coalesced to bring us to this current moment in carceral history. And it should not be forgotten that today's prison fails at reducing recidivism (Cullen et al. 2011) and disproportionately disrupts the lives of racial and ethnic minorities and the lower classes, despite similar rates of reported criminal activity across racial and class divides (Morenoff 2005; Wheelock and Uggen 2008). I will close with words from one participant, Jake, who highlighted exactly this when he mused:

They round up poor people. Even though these white-collar types are more likely to fuck you over, they treat *us* like demons. They do it to whole neighborhoods. They do it to whole *races!* They treat a kid like a criminal, a villain, his whole life. It's all he's ever told he is. It's the only version of himself he sees on TV. And they turn around and ask him, 'Why are you like this? Why didn't you go out and get a job and work hard?' But he never gets taught that.

ENDNOTES

INTRODUCTION

[1] In order to protect the confidentiality of participants, all names in this dissertation—including the names of individual prisoners and staffers, the institution itself, and certain departments or firms—are aliases. Specific information about the facility, such as its location or particulars regarding the size and characteristics of its prisoner population, have also been minimized to secure participant confidentiality.

[2] Debates persist over the usage of the term "inmate," which is sometimes received as derogatory or dehumanizing to individuals behind bars; the term "prisoner," conversely, highlights the involuntary nature of captivity. Acknowledging these concerns, I primarily refer to participants as "prisoners," but will occasionally rely on the term "inmate" where appropriate for the simple reason that they commonly referred to themselves using both terms.

[3] "Able" prisoners refers to those deemed both physically and mentally capable of engaging in regular work tasks. Additionally, this refers to those who have not be labeled to represent a threat to security, which captures those in medium or low-security complexes. It is difficult to determine the proportion of incarcerated individuals held in this level of facility within state prison systems because such statistics are not publicly shared in some states and because not all states rely on the same ranking system of security level; however, the federal system offers a helpful metric: according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, over 84% of prisoners under federal custody are held in medium, low, or minimum-security units, as of 2018 (Federal Bureau of Prisons 2018).

[4] As always, there remain some exceptions. For instance, in his (2005) study of changing penal technologies, architecture, and strategy, John Irwin illustrates how "inmate society" has adapted to the emergence of "warehouse prisons" in the United States. Within this context, other qualitative scholars have examined processes such as the micro-level practices of race-making behind bars (Goodman 2014) and the struggle for dignity and sanity faced by prisoners and staffers within repressive penal environments (Rhodes 2004). Others have outlined the role of drug counseling programs in surveillance and disciplinary structures behind bars (McCorkel 2003, 2013), the ways in which religious affiliation and participation in religious

programming structures the social world of the imprisoned (Ellis 2017), and cross-national differences in outlooks towards gender and work in women's prisons (Haney 2008, 2010).

[5] Other recent work connecting carceral experiences with prisoners' outside communities and other social and economic structures in the U.S. and other nations (Clear 2007; Crewe 2009; Wacquant 2001, 2013) reveals that prison is not an isolated "total institution" or "world apart" (Goffman 1961). Instead, prisoner life is "translocal"—constituted by interlocked internal and external social systems—and is shaped by the constellation of prisoner ties to outside actors and institutions as much as by structures, practices, and policies on the inside (Cunha 2014). Work is central to this: "Though they [prisoners] have been removed from social life by judicial decision, they are nonetheless 'organically' linked to society by way of their productive labor" (Guilbaud 2010: 42).

[6] Stevens et al. (2008) discuss the utility of the sieve metaphor in understanding another major social institution: the school.

[7] Prisoner pay in prisons in the Sunbelt region exhibits a similar range. However, some states in this region do not pay *any* captive laborers under their supervision, while some others compensate workers in *some* but not all work programs. These numbers were compiled from online and archival sources with support from an NSF DDRI grant. The pay for work at SSP (which I report as ranging from $0.05 to over $1.00) has been modified slightly to help maintain confidentiality.

[8] 2005 is the most recent year for which such statistics are currently available. Estimates suggest that these rates are the same today, if not higher (Benns 2015; Hatton 2017).

CHAPTER 1

[9] The value of the metaphor of "work-worlds" to capture the physical, hierarchical, innovative, relational nature of organizations is examined in Delbridge and Sallaz (2015).

[10] This is commonly remedial education and high school-equivalency instruction. The rest of the non-working body are largely those who have been classified as physically or mentally unfit for work, or deemed too great a security threat.

[11] The notion of the prison as "a city within the city" and related metaphors were common. Another staffer would say: "It's a *monster* in here! It's basically its own city." Similarly, one incarcerated worker referred to the prison as a distinct "biosphere," while another saw it as a sinister "empire." Many prisoners would also refer to the institution as a "giant warehouse" (sometimes as a site of labor, other times in the sense of storing bodies), with one going so far as to paint it as a "human cube farm."

[12] It should be noted, however, that "racial politics" does not here refer exclusively to the racialized gangs with which many prisoners are affiliated. Rather, it refers to a more expansive system of rules and norms to which all prisoners, regardless of gang affiliation or lack thereof, may nevertheless be compelled to adhere.

[13] Prisoners were only able to make outgoing calls to pre-approved numbers of businesses throughout the country. Additionally, they did not have open access to email clients. Instead, they composed email messages, which were then forwarded to civilian staff members who vetted each message before forwarding on to clients. Similarly, incoming emails were first captured in staff inboxes, read and approved, and then forwarded to prisoners.

CHAPTER 2

[14] Disadvantages along gender lines are also apparent, such as in the recent rise of black female imprisonment (Harmon and Boppre, 2016).

[15] The five groups representing the core of racial politics in the facility were whites, blacks, Native Americans, Mexican-Americans, and foreign nationals (a.k.a. "paisas"). The term "paisa" was short for "paisano" or "countryman" in Spanish. Most foreign nationals were citizens of Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba, and other Latin American nations.

CHAPTER 3

[16] The possibility of "selection bias" in regards to who attains a position in desirable work programming should be noted. Some men already possessing the characteristics recognized as "work ethic" (e.g., self-

discipline, respect for authority, desire to work) may indeed self-select into the pursuit of top-tier work programs. Or, those already inclined to possess such features might be more likely to be hired. If this be the case, however, it merely serves to highlight the reproductive function of the prison employment system. Regardless of the perceptions with which they enter, prisoners will reflect or adopt the outlooks and practices privileged by the top-tier work site and by the professionalism game, or else they will likely struggle to maintain their position and any accompanying benefits.

CHAPTER 4

[17] Most states pay something in the form of prison wages, with the exception of Arkansas, Georgia, and Texas, where the incarcerated receive no pay for their state-supervised penal labor assignments, nor for their "correctional industry" assignments through state-owned businesses (see note 7).

CONCLUSION

[18] It should also be recognized that, although the structure of the prison employment system enables some to acquire greater status and higher pay than others, all prisoners are nevertheless subject to an expansive system of dehumanization, control, uncertainty, and precarity. Yet, for those at the top of the penal labor hierarchy, wage exploitation is daily justified on the grounds of its relative context. The institution reproduces inequalities *not* by privileging or benefiting those of higher status, but by systematically oppressing others to a greater extent. The relative benefits experienced by these few function to engender competition as others pursue the chance to benefit from the perks of a top-tier position—at the possibility of injecting value into their own lives.

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